



If procrastination is a bane of your existence, don't put off reading this edition of WorkCare's *Wellness Monthly*.

## Procrastination Not Just a Lack of Motivation

You may put things off 'til tomorrow that you could do today, like washing the dishes or making a dental appointment. Maybe you prefer to take your time while gathering information before making a big decision, such as whether to accept a job offer or buy a house.

Occasional lack of motivation or prolonged deliberation are not habitual procrastination. An estimated 20 percent of the adult U.S. population suffers from *chronic* procrastination, a type of behavior that can have serious quality-of-life consequences.

Regrettably, chronic procrastinators do not allow themselves to experience a sense of accomplishment and may miss out on activities that make life more enjoyable. Studies show they are susceptible to stress-induced conditions such as insomnia, and illnesses like colds, flu and stomach upsets. Procrastination with regard to scheduling recommended preventive medical checkups can also lead to health problems down the road.

### Underlying Causes

Americans who pride themselves on their can-do attitude may see procrastination as laziness, a character flaw or poor time management skills, but that is not the case. Procrastination involves both physiological and psychological components. In some cases, feeling burned out or overwhelmed can cause a person to feel stuck.

Britt Frank, a neuro-psychotherapist and author of the [\*Science of Stuck\*](#), has identified the commonly known fight, flight or freeze response as an underlying cause of procrastination. When the brain and nervous system tell the body how to react to a real or imagined threat, one of two types of responses may occur: parasympathetic nervous system procrastination (freeze) or sympathetic nervous system procrastination (fight or flight).

In a [\*Psychology Today\* interview](#), Dr. Joseph Ferrari, a psychologist and author of numerous books on the topic, describes chronic procrastination as a maladaptive lifestyle. "Non-procrastinators focus on the task that needs to be done. They have a stronger personal identity and are less concerned about what psychologists call social esteem – how others like us – as opposed to self-esteem, which is how we feel about ourselves," he said.

According to Dr. Ferrari, chronic procrastination is not simply waiting or delaying. It is a decision to not act. He has observed that chronic procrastinators have self-sabotaging tendencies and often rely on seemingly

plausible reasons for not getting things done. He says chronic procrastinators tend to fall into one of three categories:

- Thrill-seekers who wait until the last minute to make a move in order to get a euphoric rush.
- Fear or success avoiders who are mainly concerned about what others think of them.
- Non-decision-makers, which eliminates the need to take responsibility for outcomes.

Studies suggest that the likelihood of becoming a chronic procrastinator is greater for those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or passive-aggressive, revenge-oriented or obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Some adults become chronic procrastinators in response to childhood experiences, such as being raised by authoritarian parents who inhibited their ability to practice [self-regulation](#).

## Overcoming Procrastination

Procrastination can be a symptom of underlying issues such as anxiety, perfectionism, fear of failure or lack of confidence. Addressing these issues in therapy can help reduce procrastination in the long term.

For example, starting with small steps, a cognitive behavioral therapist might advise a client to:

1. Identify something the client has been putting off;
2. Examine all the reasons for delay;
3. Visualize how it will feel to complete the selected task or activity.

Here are some recommended strategies for reducing procrastination:

- Make a list of tasks.
- Set realistic goals.
- Select one meaningful task.

- Determine how long it will realistically take to accomplish the task.
- Break the task into manageable steps.
- Promise yourself a reward when a task is completed.

Tips for procrastinators in the workplace include:

- Don't assume you have to feel like doing a task in order to do it well.
- Control distractions such as email or texts and find a quiet place to work.
- Allow ideas to percolate in your subconscious mind before undertaking a creative project.
- Practice selective prioritization to help you focus on the most urgent tasks.
- Block out set times for work and schedule breaks throughout your workday.
- Practice stress management techniques, get plenty of exercise and adequate rest.

Regardless of how productive you typically are, it's a good idea to identify the time of day when you are at your peak and plan accordingly. If you slip up, forgive yourself and re-focus on moving forward rather than dwelling on past episodes of procrastination. Celebrate when you reach milestones to reinforce positive behavior.

## Additional Resources

[How to Finally Stop Procrastinating: Six simple tricks to get you back on track](#); *Psychology Today*, 2021.

[Procrastination, Perfectionism, and Other Work-related Mental Problems](#); this paper explores proposed treatments for these problems; *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 2021.

[Procrastination: When Good Things Don't Come to Those Who Wait](#); this paper reviews 40 years of research on procrastination and compares it to functional forms of delay; *European Psychologist*, 2013.