



COWORKING

by Carta

A community to help you grow, scale and thrive.

You vs Procrastination – Who's Winning?



If you have slipped into the habit of procrastination and it is causing you difficulty at work or in your personal life it may be time for you to assess your situation. You could have underlying issues that need your attention. While procrastination might not be something you can avoid entirely, the good news is that common issues can be overcome by implementing a simple strategy or two.

You versus Procrastination, who's Winning?

It is not uncommon for people to defer doing unpleasant tasks - "I'll just leave it until tomorrow". The problem is that stack of tomorrow files gets bigger and bigger. All the while, that nagging voice in your head makes you feel horrible.

Procrastination makes you feel rotten, guilty, or stressed. You know it is a bad idea to avoid a nagging task. Yet, you do it anyway. You may make excuses that you need to be in the right mood or pick a good time to exercise or tackle a project. Even when an issue matters to you, some essential part of you can struggle with avoidance and delay? You are willing to undertake and complete the task, and will eventually do so, just right not now.

To win the battle against procrastination, first you must understand why you procrastinate and then commit to one or two easy strategies that will keep you on track while training your brain not to give into procrastination



Why do People Procrastinate

When procrastination happens do you label yourself as *lazy*? You do not procrastinate because you are lazy. Laziness suggests idleness, apathy or aversion. You know you are not lazy when you choose to do something else. More often than not, you procrastinate because that *something else* brings you more immediate satisfaction.

Your Brains Seeks Instant Gratification.

There is a reason that happens. The human brain constantly peers into the immediate future trying to seize an opportunity for instant gratification and values it more highly than rewards or long term pay-off in the distant future, even when that future is eight hours away or tomorrow. In the moment of decision, your brain is not concerned over the stress, guilt, or lost opportunities. To that part of your brain, future consequences or long term pay-off mean very little because they exist far away. The brain is not interested in the why. It wants to indulge in *here and now* appealing alternatives.

Another way to understand this is by imagining that you have two selves: your *present self* and your *future self*. The future self values long-term benefits, like a healthy bank account, fit body and projects that are finished. Your present self wants to eat chocolate cake and binge watch videos. To make the disconnect even wider, your present self lacks an emotional connection to your future self. It does not want to make decisions and it does not feel like doing the work that your future self expects or demands; it is far more focused on how you feel right now.



Here’s an example: You may go to sleep feeling motivated to tackle some long awaited task, but the next morning you find your willpower and self-discipline evaporate in favour of something else. Once the moment arrives to make the decision, you are now in the present moment, and your brain is thinking about the present self. Before you can say tick tock five times it slips into your procrastination routine, almost in auto-pilot mode. You are no longer making a choice for your future self. Your present self links the long awaited activity with too much pain, does not feel like doing the work and opts for instant gratification instead.

Fuschia Sirois, professor of psychology at the University of Sheffield in England, says, “We usually don’t procrastinate on fun things. We procrastinate on tasks or behaviours we find difficult, unpleasant, aversive or just plain boring or stressful. If a task feels especially overwhelming or provokes significant anxiety, it’s often easiest to avoid it.”

Here are a few examples of immediate gratification that trump long term-pay off. It is more gratifying to buy new furniture or book a resort vacation than bank \$100 per week for retirement. Instead of filing your taxes, you feel better hanging out with friends. You choose to look at Instagram in place of studying for an exam. We buy gym memberships and don’t end up going. Even though we believe our privacy to be important and something to be safeguarded, we give out our personal information for a “free” service or a chance to win something.

Behavioural scientists call it ‘time inconsistency’ when decision-makers are biased toward their present selves and thus put a greater weight on the choice that will currently benefit them. Some self-help gurus refer to it as not being motivated or lacking specific goals. Critics talk about ineffective planning, poor decision-making, time management, and lack of discipline. Some individuals perceive procrastination as a sign of weakness. No matter how you categorize or explain it, it is not something to trivialize.

Underlying Causes of Procrastination

Everybody occasionally has a bout of procrastination or even laziness. A day where all they want to do is hang out with friends or fly paper airplanes. In most cases, procrastination is not a sign of a serious problem. It's a common tendency that most people give in to at some point or another. This can happen when a person's physical or mental energy levels are low or they have anxiety or an aversion to doing a task.

However, if you have slipped into the habit of procrastination and it is causing you difficulty at work or in your personal life it may be time for you to assess your situation. You could have underlying issues that need your attention. While procrastination might not be something you can avoid entirely, the good news is that common issues can be overcome by implementing a simple strategy or two.

There are many underlying causes of procrastination, but these seven are the most common.

1) Inadequate Information

One of the most common problems is simply lacking sufficient information about what needs doing. Maybe you do not understand what you need to do or you need to obtain more information or clarification. If asking for help makes you feel uneasy, you are not alone. Many people do not want to appear ill-equipped to do a job or impose on others. The irony is that most people want to be helpful or feel useful.



Strategy to shift your perspective: Asking for someone's help is a sign of respect. To shift your perspective, think of the result if you don't get the help. Will not meeting a deadline have a negative impact on the project, business or your family? When you ask for help on behalf of the business, you are not being needy, you are being solution-focused. Asking for help when you need it is sensible and smart. It shows you have confidence and are a team player.

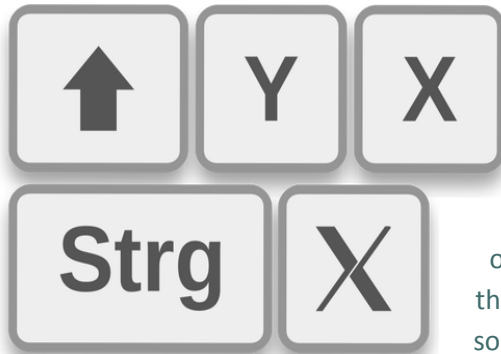
Strategy to get better at asking for help: Study how others ask for help. You can start by asking for assistance in small ways. Another practical strategy is to reframe your request so it is a conversation, rather than a transaction.

2) Undeveloped skills

Another problem that leads to procrastination is lacking the proficiency to tackle the project. When you find a task disagreeable, ask yourself: Is it possible that I dislike this task because I do not do it well?

Perhaps you need to fine tune your research skills. Maybe you are not motivated to stay current on new developments in your field of expertise. Maybe you haven't taken the time to acquire the skills to use a new application. You can be overwhelmed by the amount of work and lack the organizational ability to

restructure your work schedule to allow time for new or time consuming tasks. If you are student Maybe you have undeveloped study skills that would make your study time more efficient so you would have more time to socialize.



Shift your perspective: Start by being open to new ideas. Have you pushed yourself to learn new or different ways to do things? For example, maybe you just have to learn how to set better boundaries so that you have fewer interruptions while you are working. Could it be that you have not figured out an organizational style that fits the type of worker you are? Maybe it is more about working smarter than about working harder or longer. Are you willing to skip something in your lifestyle in order gain insight into what exactly you need to do to advance your abilities or change a behaviour?

Strategy: Identify the skills you need to improve or acquire to make your job easier. Set aside time to learn what you need through workshops, self-directed learning programs or seeking out an individual who can advise or tutor you along the way to gaining the capabilities you need to do your job well.

Another question to ask is: Is this a responsibility I could delegate to another party who might do it faster or better? If not why not?

3) Fear is a massive reason for procrastination

Most people have no clue that fear is the reason why they procrastinate. Fear exaggerates the risks and consequences and creates excuses that seem legitimate enough so that you will go back to your comfort zone and engage in more pleasurable activities. While the future self is motivated to become a big success, fear can block your present self from doing the work because of the potential pain from criticism, judgment, vulnerability, failure, rejection, ridicule, doing the wrong thing or anything that can possibly mess with your identity and self-image, even if it could potentially make your life a lot better. When you think about going to the gym, you think about your tired body being surrounded by smiling fitness gurus. Don't be afraid to get it wrong and do not let lack of knowledge or ability stop you from trying something new. You can always get more information, learn new skills, seek support and take that first step forward.



Shift your perspective. While there is no magical cure, start with the understanding that your accomplishments in school, work, or any personal pursuit surpass the opinions of others around you. Whether it is the satisfaction of doing a job to the best of your ability or the success of being able to run on a treadmill for five minutes, any achievement, no matter how big or how small, is the gift you are giving yourself. What you assume peers and coworkers might be thinking will have long been forgotten, but that gift of achievement keeps on nourishing your well-being.

Strategy: Plan to set aside ten minutes every day or one hour every week to think about the things that you fret over or that bug you. Put it on your schedule. Until that designated time you will not worry about anything. When you recognize that an emotion is creeping into work or exercise time you can remind yourself that you can hold off thinking about it until that designated time. Try to imagine you have a handy *This Bugs Me Bag* or *My Nerves are on Edge* pocket and you can capture your vexation and fretfulness and drop into the bag or seal it up in a pocket. Write your worry on a piece of paper if it helps. When the hour arrives to think about such things your emotions will have settled and you will be able to think more clearly. You can take the concerns out one by one and mull over which are important and what you have the power to overcome.

Learn more about Using your Sensory Rescue Kit in Stressful Situations

When your fears cause high levels of anxiety or other negative emotions that are difficult to manage on your own, making procrastination easy, perhaps it is time to investigate the option of seeking professional assistance to help you identify the sources of your negative emotions and develop strategies to better manage them.

4) Not having enough clarity to define what you need to do and when

Your brain is hardwired to preserve energy and to avoid uncomfortable, unknown situations. It needs a target to aim at before it can activate the mental muscle to focus. The brain expects to see things and really just wants confirm it now and again. It wants to know:

- exactly what you need to work on
- when you should be working on it
- why you need to do
- what your priorities are, and
- how you are supposed to reach that outcome effectively.

Say you have an exam on Friday. That is a broad statement. Your brain will see a maze of chapters, a mountain of reading, a jumble of papers to research and interprets all sorts of difficulties. It thinks how uncomfortable it will be and how it will use up too much energy. Your brain persuades you to choose something it thinks is easier. It would rather see specific tasks.



Shift your perspective: View your small and big tasks more specifically. Picture them in smaller chunks of time where you are taking actionable steps.

Strategy: Write a plan filled with clarity. Do it the night before. Be precise in defining a better target so your brain does not have to guess. Tomorrow morning 9:00 to 10:00 I will study chapter five. At 4 pm I will study chapter 6. This way, your brain knows exactly what to do and when to do it.

5) Envisioning the finish

When you envision finishing a task your brain turns what looks like a simple task into a mountain of overwhelming frustration and confusion; your brain finds it easy to not take action. When you think about going to the gym, it is not a single treadmill that you envision, it is row upon row of exercise equipment, and how tired you will be after working out on each one.

Have you ever been so overwhelmed and felt under so much pressure that you muttered, “Screw it, I don’t even care!” Then you don’t go to the gym; any housework you planned to do comes to a standstill.

Clearly when work pressures weigh you down, one remedy might simply be that you need to take a break and get some rest. However, as a general rule, people who feel overwhelmed just need a place to start.



Shift your Perspective: Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago tells procrastinators, “All they can see is forest and they become so overwhelmed by the size of the forest (or project) that they’re paralyzed into inactivity.” He tells procrastinators, “Cut down one tree at a time. You can’t do one tree? Give me three branches. Once you’ve gotten started, and made even a small bit of progress on your task, there’s a good chance you’ll keep going.”



Strategy: Not everyone is inclined to like all tasks. Unfortunately, the task will not go away. Focus on starting rather than on finishing. Like the previous strategy for clarity, break the task into smaller segments.

Decide one small thing to do first: Starting is usually the hardest part. If you are writing a letter, instead of staring at a blank document you can start by putting the date at the top. If you need to clean your refrigerator, start by cleaning just half of a shelf or one drawer. Do not write a book, write a paragraph. Make it as easy or as minimal as possible to get started. You might identify aspects of the assignment that might be more interesting and begin with one of those.

Use the push 5 rule: Pick out a task that you have been avoiding. Do it, but only do it for five minutes. Anyone can work for five minutes. Set a timer. Do that task until the timer goes off. Do not watch the clock. If after five minutes it’s so unbearable that you have to stop, you are free to do so.

- However, what most people find is that after five minutes of doing something, it’s much easier to continue until the task is done. By thinking about the task as something that may take only 5 minutes, it feels much less overwhelming and a lot more doable.

- By simply working for a *limited amount of time* you went from standing still to moving – and according to the laws of physics, something that’s already in motion requires a lot less force to keep in motion. That’s how momentum works in your mind too.
- When your timer dings to tell you five minutes is up, pick the next thing that you can spend five minutes doing. Small measures of progress help you maintain momentum over the long-run, which means you’re more likely to finish large tasks.
- Eventually you can set a timer, and make yourself stick to one task for 10 minutes at a time. Add another minute or two until you’re able to work for at least 30 minute stretches.

Pay attention to when thoughts of procrastination start to creep into your mind. When you feel tempted to procrastinate, force yourself to spend at least a five more minutes working on the task.

One additional tip that is critical: Once you begin your plan, focus on what you have done rather than what’s left to do.

6) Trying to Multitask

We are entrenched in the myth that multitasking is productive work. It is not. First, it is not humanly possible to be a multitasker. Computers are designed for multitasking; they can run more than one application simultaneously. However, science has proven that though the brain is complex and can quickly perform numberless tasks, the human brain is not wired to do two things at once. Juggling tasks causes a bottlenecking effect because your brain has a structural capacity limitation which only allows cognitive processes to proceed serially or one at a time. Your brain also has a limited pool of energy.

What you may think of as multitasking is really just bouncing back and forth between tasks very quickly – switch-tasking. Each time you switch activities, you force your brain’s executive functions (the part that manages how, when, and in what order you do tasks) to go through two energy-intensive stages. This might not mean much if you are brushing your teeth and watching a movie at the same time. But, when you have important things to accomplish it can be detrimental to productivity or downright dangerous.



Shift your Perspective: When you look at the MRI of someone who is in driving mode, you see how much of their brain is activated? Now if you just layer in one more thing like talking on the phone or listening to a podcast while driving all of a sudden the amount of attention and the amount of brain bandwidth going toward driving decreases by about 37%.

When you try to multi-task you are volleying your cognitive energies back and forth like a tennis ball. Depending on the complexity of the task or the cognitive load, your brain may not be as responsive as the tennis ball and it uses up a lot of brain bandwidth which contributes to mental fatigue and can cost as much as 40% of your productivity time.

Strategy: First stop trying to multitask. Period. When you try to multitask you are just adding to the mountain of frustration that overwhelms you. It stops you from getting into a state of flow.

One of the best things you can do is create a focused daily schedule that promotes single-tasking.

- Determine the hours you are most productive and plan to do your most intense work without interruptions at that time.
- Let the people in your life and organization know what this time is dedicated for. Encourage them to do the same.
- Create a clear workspace that removes the reminders of non-essential work that might draw your attention away from deep work.
- Ignore your phone, messages and email during deep work. Schedule chunks of time for those items outside that time.
- When you choose a task to work on, focus on what you “should” do, not what you “could” do.

7) Perfectionism

Do you have unrealistically high expectations or standards? Everything must go completely right? Do you think in extremes like?

- My performance is either great or terrible.
- I’m either smart or stupid.
- I’m either wrong or right.
- I never wanted to start something unless I know exactly how to do it.
- If I can't do it right, I don't do it at all.

Perfectionism is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can motivate you to perform at a high level and deliver top-quality work. On the other, it can cause you to procrastinate because with an all or nothing approach you have no middle ground or gray area to move past the point of doing nothing at all. Perfectionists spend so much time focusing on what they need to fix and do not see everything this is good which can lead to them giving up, too.



Shift your perspective: Can you find truth in these statements?

1. Seldom is anything accomplished that is completely perfect or completely acceptable or right, especially the first time it.
2. It is impossible to eradicate all mistakes.
3. Errors are not fatal.
4. Even making mistakes is far better than doing nothing at all.

If you genuinely want to be a high achiever, you have to allow yourself to be less perfect about some things so that you can concentrate on what is important.

This is especially true if you are doing new things. As a beginner you should expect to do some things imperfectly. However, your second try will be an improvement and your third and fourth attempts will be great. Instead of the all or nothing approach think more about the value of *all of something*.

This is also true if you are working collaboratively. Your first effort does not have to be worthy of world praise. Often it is not even the final word because you may receive feedback from clients or colleagues that adds new insights to change or improve what you initially did. The truth is that most managers and bosses do not want you to fail. It is in their best interest for you to succeed. And they'd rather have input earlier on to help you course correct than have to deal with major issues when you send in your "perfect" final project.

Remember, lowering your expectations does not mean you have no standards. It does mean that you give up on getting better. It means you set realistic expectations and standards, not to make you become careless in life and perform poorly at work but help you do your best without it costing you things that may be important to you, such as family life, physical and mental health, and leisure time. Try to recognize that getting it done is a decent and worthy goal because if you set too high a standard and sweat the small stuff and nitpick every detail, you will reach a point of diminishing returns and spin your wheels with little or no progress.

Strategy:

Take some of the pressure off. You do not have to aim for a lower goal, you can start by channeling your strengths and energy. Apply the Pareto Principle in the context of how you manage your attention. It is a phenomenon in society/business that resulted in the 80/20 rule. In other words 20% of your effort amounts to 80% of the effect of your work. Using that as a guide, you identify which activities comprise the vital few you need to focus on, and work on them first. The 80/20 principle does not suggest that the remaining 80% can be simply ignored. You move on to doing them once you complete the big ones.

If you have a 10-item to-do list with each task being equally time-consuming, you can boost your efficiency by identifying and completing two top-priority tasks. As a result, even if you don't manage to do all the remaining tasks, the 20% you completed could amount to up to 80% of the impact.

Instead of criticizing and nitpicking something to death use more self-praise because that will help fight procrastination.

You have learned about seven common underlying causes of procrastination and approaches that work. No matter the underlying factors, being in the middle of procrastination is often more painful than being in the middle of doing the work. The guilt, shame, and anxiety that you feel while procrastinating are usually worse than the effort and energy you have to put in while you're working. The problem is not doing the work, it's starting the work.

Set the Tone for an Excellent Day

Quality Sleep

The foundation of any day is quality sleep so you wake up with a well-rested body and mind. When you start your day after a night of restful sleep, you will wake feeling rejuvenated and ready to take on the day. There is absolutely no substitute for sleep. [Learn more about a Healthy Sleep.](#)



Make the First Two Tasks of your day Achievable

When you are overworked and continually under stress, bit by bit it can rob you of valuable time and energy – distracting you from doing *what you do best*. Here is one strategy that you can incorporate into your morning routine so that you are sure to start your day off right because the tone of your morning will determine the tone of your day.

Choose to do two things that you can complete **quickly and effectively**. The two activities should be choices that focus on putting you in a proactive state of mind. Choose two things that can be done quickly because that is the quick-energy start your brain needs for momentum. They should also be achievable so that you start your day with a sense of confidence and stability.

They can be part of your morning routine but they should not be mundane like brushing your teeth. The two tasks should not be work related or instant gratification type activities. Checking email, your smart phone for messages or social media puts you in reactive or defensive mode. What might you find? An email asking for work-related documents? A friend’s crisis post on Facebook? These are the kinds of things that could potentially keep you from concentrating on your own concerns.

My 2 Achievable Tasks

Item 1

Item 2

The key is to start your day by engaging your brain to do something totally within your control and for yourself. Instead of reaching for your phone, reach for

paper and a pencil, or ingredients for a tasty breakfast. You could make your bed so it is more welcoming for later in the evening. You could meditate, read a page in a book or open your blinds and stand in the sunshine to do one minute of deep breathing. You could do something that challenges or excites your brain or pick one of the many key elements of self-care. Ben Franklin used to ask himself this question every morning: What good shall I do today?

Set your alarm five or ten minutes earlier if you must. Just make sure that you complete both. This approach established a feeling of productive output, an attitude you need to overcome procrastination.

The next strategy will help you accomplish this.

Strategies that Work

Here are twelve more strategies that work. Whether you are in the habit of procrastinating on work tasks or behavioural changes, implement just one or two into your daily routine and within a short period of time you will recognize the benefits cascading throughout your work and personal life.

Your Brain Requires an Exact Plan – Make a Strict List

Many of us struggle with the never-ending nature of our to-do lists. When important work need to be done, a mental list of mundane chores looms and takes up headspace, slows you down, adds anxiety and stress to your day. That's leads to procrastination.

Key point #1 - Make a list of only the most essential 5 or 6 activities.

Remember, your brain works best when you give it specific direction. Create a focused daily to-do list with the specific times that you will do each task. And stick to it

At the end of each work day, write down the five or six most important things you need to accomplish tomorrow. If you are trying to establish a new morning habit write it down. Do not write down more than six tasks. You want to focus on single-tasking. If it's one big task, break it into six manageable segments. That way you can focus on one part at a time.

1. Prioritize those items in order of their true importance.
2. The completion of each piece is your designated stopping point. If underestimating how long a project will take is part of what causes procrastination for you, try thinking about a task in terms of how many 25-minute blocks of time it will realistically take.
3. Fit real breaks into this list because they are equally important.

Studies show we work best in 90 – 120 minute cycle of alertness before we need a mental break. When your body signals you that the 90 minute boundary has been crossed, you should disengage and walk away from the computer, the office, technology and your work environment.

Checking email, making a work related phone call, researching a question all count as work, not a break. You have to do something different and refreshing to help your brain recharge. A real break takes your mind away from what you're doing completely. A different environment like the outdoors or a different room looking at the outdoors does that. Pretend you are going to a meeting, but instead of people you are meeting with birds and trees.



[Read more about Relaxation and Restful Breaks](#)

Essentially, on a daily basis you stop, think, and decide what six tasks or activities will get your attention. Clarify exactly *what* it is that you're going to work on tomorrow. Know exactly *when* you're going to work on *what* task.

Key point #2 – Work is not the only thing on the list that matters.

Basically you make an appointment with yourself to commit to things like project work, creative time, reading, decision-making, strategic thinking, paperwork, behaviour modification, time for your hobbies, leisure activities, and anything else that really matters. Work is not the only thing on your list that is essential to your growth or success. Studies show that people who commit to maintaining healthy leisure time along with their hard work outperform those who doggedly pursue an endless treadmill.

You should consider these six appointments with yourself as important as appointments with your most valuable customer. It is your assurance to do the tasks that matter most.

4. When you arrive tomorrow, eliminate potential interruptions or distractions and concentrate only on the first high priority task. Work until the first task is finished or until you reach a stopping point for a break. Do not watch the clock. Set a timer instead. Hone in on the task with your full attention until you are finished or the timer goes off. When you set a timer you decide you're going to direct all your attention to completing what you can in that time frame. Approach the rest of your list in the same fashion.
5. Set a quitting time.
6. At the end of the day, move any unfinished items to a new list of six tasks for the following day.
7. Repeat this process every working day. Try not to add a 7th or 8th item to the list or swap items.

Key Point #3 – All you have to do is show up every day and stick to keeping those appointments with yourself.

It is in fact a valuable skill in itself to commit to showing up every day. Every human being wakes up every day with an initial question or primary purpose. What am I doing today? You might wake Monday morning thinking about training a coworker. Tuesday it's about delivering a presentation, Saturday its meeting friends for lunch. Sunday it's the game final. Instead of making those day-specific tasks your primary question, your primary question should stay the same every day. I have to be on time for my first appointment of the day. Rather than fretting over the tasks themselves, that primary question mentally centers you on one thing to show up for that appointment and everything else you do up to that time fuels your energy to show up for that appointment.

If you only do the work when you feel like it you will be trapped in an endless loop of procrastination. That is hardly a professional approach to being a student, administrator, entrepreneur or authority on anything worthwhile and it not the person you want to face in the mirror.

There will be days when it is inconvenient, annoying, maybe even painful to step up and keep that first appointment. But here's a promise: you will never feel guilty for making time for something that matters and you will never be disappointed that you started.

To create a better experience:

Whenever possible, put an objectionable task at the top of your list. Once you finish something you dislike you will feel relieved it is out of the way. Your next task will be more agreeable. Feeling your experience improve between tasks – and in a short period of time – helps you to feel more relaxed. It is a positive experience. As you finish each task your positive experiences continue to mount and your feelings of satisfaction move up a notch. When you feel satisfied, you are more likely to follow through and finish your next task. That is a good way to finish your day.

Whenever possible, leave non-essentials or mundane tasks until after you have completed your priority list of important work. If the nature of your work dictates that you have other responsibilities that cannot be ignored, you can designate times when you are open to interruptions or to do routine tasks. This way, disruption will not affect the quality of your important work as much.

You may be inclination to do the fun stuff first thing in the morning, thinking that you will tackle the difficult or disagreeable tasks later. It is more rewarding for your brain to know that once you get the tough stuff done first, it will have some fun things to do later.

To make it easier,

- Keep your list obvious, so you can see it at a glance. A handwritten list in your handwriting reminds you that you think they are important. As you finish each task put a bold check mark on your list.
- Ignore your phone, messages and email during these appointments. Schedule chunks of time for those items outside that time.
- Reward yourself. You've given your brain something better to do than avoid or procrastinate. Your brain loves rewards. It is important to acknowledge and reward yourself for achieving even the small tasks. Make your reward proportional to the task you completed.
- It might be helpful to maintain a timeline of recurring deadlines or upcoming projects. Use that as a starting point to create a weekly to-do list of twenty or fewer items that you can refer to for your daily list.

Utilize a Powerful Trigger to Remind you to Stay the Course

We humans have great intentions. We strive for big things, and have a great start and then somewhere along the line we lose our momentum and discipline to stick with a plan. We cheat on our diets, lose enthusiasm for exercise, or fall back on poor behaviours, like the habit of procrastination. No matter what strategy you employ to beat your tendency to procrastinate, you could get caught up in old routines.

Like changing any behaviour pattern the biggest struggle is getting through the first few days until your brain is persuaded to implement an action on its own and repeat it till it becomes part of the new routine you want to achieve.

You might say, *if only someone could constantly remind me of what I ought to be doing*. How annoying would it be to have someone harping in your ear? When you procrastinate you already have that voice in your head. Still a powerful trigger would help to remind your brain what to do. Each habit has a trigger, a routine and a reward. The trigger serves as a cue for your brain to get started with the task, the routine refers to the behaviour associated with the task and the ultimate reward is the actual benefit of the task.

Science has proved that vision dominates all our senses and we're more likely to remember something when it has an image associated with it. All you need is a visual cue to persuade you tackle the next task on your list of six key items. That is all it takes to focus. No detailed tutorial, no secret ingredient. So what visible cue can you use, and how?

In his book, *Atomic Habits*, author James Clear tells the interesting story of how a 23 year-old stock broker working at a bank in Abbotsford used some paper clips to help catapult his career. His name was Trent Dyrsmid and his goal was to make 120 sales calls each day. It was a tedious undertaking. To keep him focused, Dyrsmid would start out each day with two jars on his desk. One jar contained 120 paper clips. One was empty. Every time he made a call, he would move one paper clip to second jar. "I would keep dialing the phone until I had moved them all to the second jar."

When asked about the details of his habit, Dyrsmid said, "I would start calling at 8 a.m. every day. I never looked at stock quotes or analyst research. I also never read the newspaper for the entire time. If the news was really important, it would find me from other ways."

Notice that his daily goal was not to sell a certain amount of product. He couldn't control the quality of the leads he had in any given day or how receptive they would be to investing with his firm. But he had complete control over his sales calling behavior. He knew that if he made the 120 calls each day, the income would eventually follow. It worked. Within a couple years, this paper clip strategy was earning this young man a six-figure salary.

Trent Dyrsmid's story is evidence of a simple truth: Success is often a result of committing to the fundamentals over and over again. This does not apply to just earnings, it is true no matter what goal you are trying to achieve.



For you, the magic of the paper clips could just as easily be 6 marbles, one for each task on your list. Your visual cue could be photographs of a loved one or anything that has an element of importance to you and serves to encourage you to tackle item number 2, 3 and 4. How about beading a bracelet or necklace – one bead for each appointment you keep or task you did not procrastinate. Every day that you keep your to do list appointments the chain of beads gets longer until you can wear it. You could create a chain of paper clips and let it extend around the room. You give

yourself a reward when the chain reaches from one corner of the room to another. How about a get-away week-end?

Make sure that you keep your visual cue obvious to where you are situated. It serves as a reminder to start. Just one glance shows your progress and just the act of touching it upon completion of a task will give you immediate satisfaction. When you tightly unite your tasks to a specific cue, like a chain of paper clips it showcases your consistency not to procrastinate.

Be Conscious of Self-Talk

The talk that really counts is the self-talk. If you ever really listened to your mental conversations you would stop in a heartbeat. Have you ever muttered, “I have to work all weekend!”? That is a clear example of self-talk that could actually encourage procrastination. To understand how this example, or a variation of it, is an inappropriate choice of words, let’s break it down.

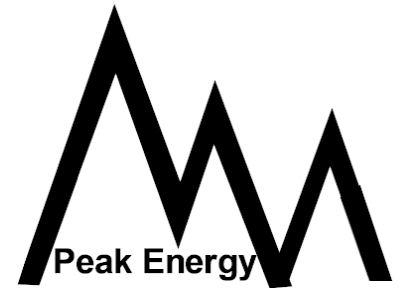
The words “I have to” is every procrastinator’s favourite expression. It is also the most disempowering. Every time you say to yourself that you have to do something, you imply that you don’t have any choice. On the other hand, using language that expresses choice ‘I choose to’ reminds you that everything you do is ultimately a choice. “I’ve have to work all weekend”. Means the same as I am trapped which brings on a strong sense of deprivation and victimhood. Word choice that implies that you feel forced or coerced to do the task will elicits a strong feeling resentment and resistance towards doing the task.

We are not suggesting that you pretend that unappealing aspects of the task do not exist. Rather than focusing on the obstacles or negatives of a task, bring positive approach motives into your mind. Replace negative self-talk with growth related words.

Add the magic word “yet” to the end of negative statements that include phrases that suggest impossibilities, such as “I can’t”. I cannot build a website by myself, yet. I have not learned to skydive, yet. I haven’t master the art of public speaking. yet.

Work with your Body's Natural Ebbs and Flows.

Your body's energy has its own path and you are naturally more energetic and motivated at specific times of the day. Work with it, because these are the most important hours of your work day. When your energy is at its peak is when your productivity curve and your brain's self-control are at their highest. This is the ideal time to schedule uninterrupted blocks of time for focusing on deep work or doing the hardest tasks, especially the six things on your list.



You might think that when you have tons of energy you can do two or three things at once. However, the pressures and negatives of switch-tasking takes its toll on your cognitive energies and that can set your whole day back. Studies show that single tasking focus helps energy and self-control to last longer.

Your energy level is a basic reminder that you cannot do it all, and that you should be strategic in how you plan your day. On a more complex level, it provides you a roadmap for designing the perfect work day based on your own rising and falling productivity.

Minimize Distractions and Remove Obstacles

There are legitimate reasons why you may be putting tasks on the back burner and sometimes there is little that can be done when the circumstances are out of your immediate control. But, habitual procrastination due to unnecessary distractions should not be one of them. Clutter, external noises, people, technology, games and toys can deter you from focus. You want to focus on what you *should do*, not what you *could do*.

Whenever possible create an environment where you are free to focus on just one thing instead of allowing your brain to react to what's happening around you. Just as an obvious visual cue can drive you to action to do what you should do, the opposite is true. An obvious cue can distract you and spur you to procrastinate. You may be surrounded by visual cues that shout, *look what you could be doing!* The solution is to make those temptations less obvious or even invisible. If you cannot make them disappear at least make them inconvenient. If your procrastination is a result of you being exhausted, and you are tired because you stay up too late watching TV in bed every night, remove the TV from the bedroom.

To ensure that distractions and disruptions do not interrupt your flow: Aim for privacy whenever possible. Put up a do-not-disturb sign. Minimize the clutter. Create a clear workspace that removes the reminders of non-essential work that might draw your attention away from deep work. Wear headphones if you cannot eliminate the outside noise. Hide your technology if you cannot ignore it. Delete apps if you have to. Disable the automatic notification option in your email client and smart phone. Make fun stuff less accessible.

Keep to the simple rule: Yes, emergencies and unexpected distractions will arise. Ignore them as much as possible, deal with them when you must, and get back to your prioritized to-do list as soon as possible.

Peer Pressure Works

Want to avoid procrastinate? Let your peers help. Generally speaking most of us do not want to let the team down. We want to please people. That makes peer pressure a strong motivating force.

- Ask someone to check up on you.
- Advertise your plans to accomplish something. When your brain starts to sway you away from work you will be reminded that, "I told the team that I was going to finish this. They know I bought a gym membership.' Someone is bound to ask you about it.



- Be accountable to a procrastination buddy. Maybe someone who also deals with procrastination. Set a block of time during the week and keep each other accountable for work done. Eliminate all distractions. Have a quick call with your buddy before you start to tell each other what you will each accomplish in that block of time. Set the alarm. Afterwards have another quick call to check if all things got done, and to schedule your next productive session. With the two calls, you will hold each other accountable to your work plan and you can celebrate your wins too.
- Seek positive peer influence. Try to spend time with people who have a good influence on you. This includes, for example, people who work hard, pursue their goals, and hold themselves accountable for their actions, and who encourage you to do the same.

Re-Engage your Brain to Boost your Will Power

In terms of procrastination, willpower is your ability delay gratification or control what your brain would rather do than work on a long list of objectionable tasks. You cannot count on your brain to forfeit instant gratification when a future reward or concern for a penalty seems a long way off. Your brain needs a little shove in one direction or another. You can control the situation to create urgency or make a behaviour appear more appealing in order to heighten your brain's need to recognize it has a more pressing or better choice.

I can
AND
I will

Make future consequences become present consequences:

You can make a future reward or penalty more immediate, so that your brain recognizes that if you procrastinate there will be consequence sooner than later. Say you in the habit of avoiding your exercise sessions because your brain opts for several lazy mornings and does not care about future consequences. When you exercise alone you are only accountable to yourself. No one knows that you tell yourself you will do it tomorrow, but rarely do. However, if you promise to meet a friend three mornings a week you are accountable to another person; she is expecting to see you 7 am. You bring the consequence of skipping a workout to the here and now. When you miss a session you are not the only one affected.

Using this same example you can bet with a family member or friend that you will go to the gym three days a week. For every day that you do not comply, you lose \$20.

If your aim is to eliminate distractions you could penalize yourself physically and financially. Determine how much money you have for vacation. Say it is \$1000. Schedule time for surfing the net or social media. When you cheat outside that time you have to have to get down and do 10 or 25 push-ups. When you do not perform the required push-ups you have to deduct \$50 from your vacation fund.

The point is to find a way to create a new consequence if you do not do something right now.

Form a Link with a Preceding Event:

Exploit your predictable behaviours: Procrastination is an ineffective habit. You already have efficient predictable habits that your brain performs in auto-pilot mode or default mode. These habits are built into your brain to help you to function smoothly in the world. You do not hem and haw over making a cup of coffee, listening to music, or having a snack. Throughout the day, you have lots of things that you perform automatically. Instead of taking them for granted, you can take advantage of a few to establish a new habit.

James Clear, who is an authority on changing habits notes, "When I make my morning cup of coffee, I will meditate for one minute...Each night, when I sit down to eat dinner, I say one thing that I was grateful for that day."

In his book Atomic Habits he wrote: “Many habits are a response to something else that happens in your life. Your phone buzzes, so you pick it up to check your latest text message. The little notification bar lights up on Facebook, so you click it to see what it signals. These are examples of habits that are triggered by a preceding event.”

If you are implementing a new habit link it to a preceding event. Start by identifying something you consistently do every day. Use habit as your cue to implement your new habit.

The key is to add the new habit right afterward. Not five or ten minutes later.

For example: After you brush your teeth you do five or ten pushups. When you turn off your computer you spend ten minutes learning a new language that for months has been on your to do list.

Start small. You want to make it easy to start. Remember the push - 5 rule. To link a new habit with a preceding event you can start with one or two minutes. Your goal may be to do fifty push-ups or study for an hour per day and you can gradually work up to that.

There is only one rule: it’s never okay to not do it.

Eventually, your old habit will trigger your new habit.

Bundling and Pairing:

You are more likely to find a behavior attractive if you get to do one of your favorite things at the same time.

Bundling is a concept that came out of behavioral economics research performed by Katy Milkman at The University of Pennsylvania. If you like a task you are you more likely to finish it no matter what. If you dislike a task is it easier to get distracted, to procrastinate and thereby fall behind in some of your work. Simply put, the bundling strategy suggests that you bundle a behavior that is good for you in the long-run with a behavior that feels good in the short-run. The basic format of bundling is this: Only do a *thing you love* while doing the *thing you procrastinate on*.

Avoiding exercise? Love podcasts? Only listen to podcasts you love while exercising.

Dislike ironing or household chores? Have a favourite show? Enjoy listening to music? Only watch your favorite show while ironing or only listen to music while doing household chores.

If you take a snack break at 11 a.m. every day, why not walk around the block at the same time?

Avoiding a meeting with a difficult colleague? Love a particular restaurant? Eat at your favorite restaurant while having your monthly meeting.

Make note that this strategy does not work particularly well if you are doing two tasks that require your undivided attention.

Create a Zone for Focused or Deep Work

Different zones will produce different behaviour patterns. Your bedroom as an example induces you to watch television or sleep. Same with work habits. Different environments and particular locations have different impact on your productivity. Your brain is familiar with the place you work and the procrastination habits or routines that you established there. It easily recognizes the nooks and crannies that house the cues that prompt instant gratification. Change it up so that your brain is not reminded.

Look at your work desk and your room. Do they make you want to work or do they make you want to snuggle and sleep? If it's the latter, you should look into changing your workspace.

Zone for deep work, zone for eating, zone for relaxing, zone for routine work, zone for thinking



Creating a new or different work zone does not have to be a drastic change. Do you have a work zone separate from where you eat or relax? It may be deciding to have a space just for work and make a point of eating elsewhere. The key is to have a distraction free environment with clear contextual cues that make you feel inspired and trigger your brain to transition into work mode.

Rearranging a room, even small changes, can be a good start. Maybe it is the direction you face in the room or the addition of blinds. Maybe you can change the height of an adjustable desk, move a plant to the other side of your desk, or bring out your jar of marbles or paper clips to trigger that it is time for deep work.

Since you are implementing new strategies to stop procrastinating, figure out if you have the space to create two work zones where one zone is dedicated for deep work. Only work in that zone when you are focusing on the six items on your to do list. When your schedule says it time to check email or take care of routine tasks you move to the other zone. Each acts like a visual cue to trigger a change in how you focus your attention?

One thing to note is that an environment that makes you feel inspired this month may lose its effect after. If that happens, change things around, but keep the contextual cues visible.

Strengthen your Brain's Ability to Focus

There are very specific things that can contribute to your motivation and inability to concentrate including, insufficient sleep, lack of physical activity, excessive drinking, eating habits, or not enough time in nature. Of course distractions and trying to multitask are two huge factors that affect concentration.

Besides a healthier lifestyle, when your mind wanders and you are easily distracted it just might be that you need to practice exercises for your brain to improve your attention span and gain a laser-type concentration to get things done.

Neuropsychologist Kim Willment of Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital suggests a single-task exercise like reading to boost attention and focus. "Read something for 30 minutes, setting a timer to go off every five minutes. When it goes off, ask yourself if your mind has wandered. If so, just refocus



on what you're reading," she says. "By training your brain to monitor if your mind is wandering, you strengthen the monitoring process and the ability to maintain focus on a single task."

There are multitudes of cognitive training exercises. Many of them are practical activities that you already do – board games, daydreaming and learning something new everyday – but, maybe not nearly often enough to exercise your brain. There may be things you never considered to be cognitive workouts, like dancing, origami, cooking, being observant, and stand-up comedy.

These are just examples of the thousands of things you can do. The key is to excite your brain and stretch it in different ways. Mostly when you stretch out you choose to do things that are new, varied or more challenging than your daily routine. You could stretch one minute into five to become more aware or curious of your surroundings or be more engaging with people. When you explore something new you can stretch out by trying to engage all your senses in non-routine ways.

[Learn more about Boosting Brain Performance](#)

Stay Connected to the Process

When confronted with a recurring task that consumes your time and that you often procrastinate maybe your first question should be, "Should I even be doing this task?" If you are overextended begin by evaluating the obligations and tasks that demand your energy. Make a list of all your obligations and demands. Create two columns:

- 1) Jobs I like doing
- 2) Jobs I dislike doing /cause me stress

Looking at each task that you find disagreeable, ask yourself.

Is it possible that I dislike doing this task because I do not do it well? Do I lack the time to do it well? How essential is this particular disagreeable task? Why am I doing these disagreeable task? Am I doing it to save money? Is it private or confidential? Is this a responsibility I could delegate to another party? If not, why not? Once you determine that it is a task that you must do commit to the process. If you must advance your skills to do the task more efficiently, commit to do so.

When you are interested in something, you turn to that hobby, book, or project when circumstances permit. When you commit to something, you accept no procrastination excuses.

Keep in mind that change like learning a new skill or diminishing bouts of procrastination are not in themselves an event. Each one is a process. We often categorize achievement or success as a single event. For instance, people will say, "If I lose 20 pounds, I'll be in shape," Or, "If I can get my business featured in the major newspapers I'll have the exposure and credibility I need." Those events are not what leads to success, it is the commitment to the process of doing so many other things well that gets you there.

When you learn a skill you have to commit to study, practice and advancing along the learning curve to gain capability and experience to become proficient.

When you want to beat the habit of procrastinating, of course you want to stay connected to the bones of what you are doing. What about this task or activity makes it important? Who does it affect? How will it makes things better? Still it is the small steps, the process that leads to those outcomes you desire.

Say your goal is to write a book. You cannot expect to get the book you want today. But, you should expect to commit to the process of transferring your thoughts into words if you want to achieve an impressive paragraph or two. An extension of that process is your daily commitment to stringing those sentences and paragraphs together until you have one polished chapter after another. Sticking to the process is what produces the book.

When you think about a project or behaviour as one event it has a snowball effect and you can get caught up in fretting over the enormity of it. Ultimately, all you really must do is to commit to finishing small manageable chunks because those bits and pieces are what constitute results and they do produce a better domino effect.

Set Boundaries by Pledging to Make Commitments you can Keep

Speaking of making commitments to yourself, take extra care that you do not make extraneous commitments in your social and work life that add to the mountain of things you think you have to do. Be selective in saying "yes". Of course you do not want to let anyone down, but if you say yes to everything, you will not be able to give 100% to everything. Your time has a value. You can eliminate, delegate, say no, or decide it has importance and put it on your to do list.

The key to making a good decision lies in clarifying what you are being asked to do? When you say yes, without asking this question, you are making an assumption and may be underestimating the time and effort it will actually take to fulfill the commitment. You must also consider how it will affect your other commitments. What's the cost of doing it? What would I need to give up to make space for this new commitment? Will I end up procrastinating on other more important things in my life?

A small task that blossoms into something major and time consuming can lead to procrastination and also ill feelings and loss of trust. By asking the question upfront, you can save yourself the embarrassment and the pain of procrastinating on that project or any others you have committed to do.

Rewards Spur you on to Achieve More

One way to develop a positive work habit is to reward yourself when you have achieved even the smallest of tasks. Small rewards create a sense of motivation and release those feel-good, productive emotions. You are more likely to repeat behaviours that are rewarded. There's nothing wrong with big, audacious triumphs, but it is the bite-sized achievements and bite size rewards along the way that rewire your brain to stop avoidance habits and boost you to the next step. .

Of course, rewards can include almost anything you may have delayed so you could get an important task done: fifteen minutes of time to listen to a podcast you like, watch sports, talk with a friend, a bite of your favourite snack food, pursuit of a hobby, or a weekend away. However, your brain will also be happy with a simple one-minute salute in which you congratulate yourself and savour the moment. In fact, it is vital that as soon as you finish a task, you take a moment to acknowledge what you have achieved. It is a way to fuse your feeling of accomplishment with action, so that your brain learns to



crave that connection.

You could make the connection even more powerful by writing down your successes, no matter how small, in a journal. Make it a habit to read your journal weekly. Reading the evidence through your own words and handwriting is another reward that convinces your brain that it works and makes your brain more willing to do *that something that works* again because it knows there is gratification immediately after. Of course, the more you do something, the stronger and more efficient your brain's connection to that something becomes.

Are you a Performance Procrastinator

Maybe you have asked yourself questions about why you drag your feet. Upon assessing your strengths and limitations you have narrowed your tendency to procrastinate down to statements such as:

“I like the *rush* of leaving things to the end and meeting a deadline. “

“I work best under pressure.”

Is it possible that you haven't read the research that shows that is not the case. Perhaps, you have forgotten the anxiety, stress, fatigue or disappointment of having to put your life on hold so you could cram for an exam or get that project done on time. Maybe you never had to deal with a last minute glitch like getting sick or a computer problem that hindered you from being able to actually do it at the last minute. Maybe you forgot the excuses you made and the guilt.

Have you considered that these statements are your inner voice justifying your delay in self-deception? Be critical and reflective of such explanations. If you have always procrastinated and done things at the last minute, in reality you do not know what it feels like to approach a project systematically and have time for input, discussion, collaboration or review – all the things that lead to improvements or excellence. You do not know what makes you feel better because you have no comparison as to what circumstances may be best for you.

You may not yet have had a hefty consequence for procrastinating; maybe you are not concerned. What is most significant, however, is that you actually may not know what you are capable of achieving. That should matter!

Today is a Starting Point

Accept that today is your new “Starting Point”: Accept wherever you are and start by making one decision and choosing just one thing that you can strategically do to stop procrastinating.

Inspired and Committed, We Celebrate Your Journey

At Corro, we believe in the power of people. We are inspired to expand humanity's capacity for wisdom, compassion, and courage.

In our commitment to helping you achieve long-term personal development and use your organizational platform for positive impact, we celebrate the journey of lifelong learning while fostering an all-inclusive community driven environment of meaning, personal connection, and fun.

Corro is not just a Work Space – Our Aim is Helping the Community Thrive through People Success