

## Tools for Tackling Procrastination

(adapted from The Procrastination Equation by Piers Steel, PhD)

Use this worksheet in combination with the Procrastination Equation to identify the variables involved in putting things off and identifying specific tools you can use to start doing things now rather than putting things off.

**Success Spirals:** Set yourself on an ongoing series of challenging but ultimately achievable goals. When you do this, you maximize your motivation and make the achievement meaningful, reflecting your capabilities. Each hard-won victory gives a new sense of self and a desire to strive for more. Every step forward is enabled by the step just taken.

How do you start a success spiral? This can be especially difficult if you are suffering from chronic discouragement and expect only failure. The essence of a success spiral: accomplishment creates confidence, which creates effort resulting in more accomplishment. The secret is to start small and pay attention to incremental improvement. Divide difficult tasks or projects into a series of doable steps, purposefully planning on some early accomplishments.

Think of an area of real interest and then strive to improve just a little beyond your current skills set. As your confidence builds, you can try exploring a bit more outside of your comfort zone.

- Volunteer for more responsibility, either at work or in your community. If it involves hard physical work, all the better. Sore muscles will remind you of your effort and your success.
- Travel to a place you have always wanted to go but thought you never would. Give yourself bonus points if you don't speak the language.
- Try an adventure course such as white-water rafting, mountain climbing, or running.
- Learn a new skill. Sign up for a class in cooking, kickboxing, photography or music. As you advance, pay attention to the small improvements in your skills and recognize them as victories.
- Challenge yourself by pushing an old hobby to a new level. If you are a runner, train for a race, join an amateur sports league or tackle a music solo.
- Break down difficult tasks into smaller pieces. Keep formal track of your progress and count your successes.

### Vicarious Victory

As humans we have untold strength, but at some point, many of us were given messages that lead us to believe we are 'broken' and we don't realize that our potential can be regained. Pessimists tend to put down personal victories with a stream of negative self-talk: "Anyone could have done that," and "It was all luck."

Seek inspiration from stories or social groups. It is easier to believe in yourself if you are surrounded by others who believe in themselves – or you.

- Watch inspirational movies – *Hotel Rwanda*, *Apollo 13*, *My Left Foot*, *Men of Honor*, *Invictus*.
- Read inspirational biographies or autobiographies. The most effective will resonate with your own background. For example, if you are a chef read *Humble Pie* by Gordon Ramsey, in which he speaks of his painful upbringing.
- Listen to talks by inspirational speakers, great leaders, athletes, heroes, entrepreneurs, TED talks.

- Join a community, service or professional association. By associating with people who are trying to better themselves or the world around them, you may be infused with optimism.
- Start your own support group by engaging a circle of mutually encouraging friends. It can be your running group, religious study group, book group, etc.

### **Wish Fulfillment**

Visualization can combat procrastination through the technique of *mental contrasting*. Detailed mental rehearsal or imagination of a performance engages mirror neurons that engrave the act in your brain almost as deeply as if you were actually practicing it. Begin by imaging what you want to achieve. Contrast what you want to be with where you are now. The result will be that your present situation becomes framed as an obstacle standing in the way of your dreams. This can maximize motivation, create increased energy and effort and jumpstart planning.

You don't have to stop what you are doing, you just need to add to it. Keep up with self-compassion, affirmations, and your personal mission statements, but afterward reflect on where you really are.

- Sit in a quiet place and clear your mind. Think about the life you want for yourself.
- Break off a manageable piece of this future by focusing on just one aspect you desire. It may be a relationship, a job, a home, or a healthy body.
- Elaborate on all that makes this mental picture attractive to you. You can use a daily diary, create a collage of images, or just spend some quiet time concentrating on it.
- Then *mentally contrast* this future with where you are now. Focus on the gap. Put the same emphasis on vividly reflecting on this discrepancy as you did on imagining your idealized future.
- If, after mentally contrasting, you remain optimistic about realizing this ideal future, you may find more motivation to pursue your goals. Procrastination may diminish as you start actively closing the gap between where you are now and where you want to be.

### **Plan for the Worst, Hope for the Best**

Very few people succeed in major life reforms on the first try. Most of the time it takes us multiple attempts to succeed. Success requires balancing optimism with realism.

- Determine what could go wrong to distract you on the way to your goal. Reflect honestly on your past experiences and seek counsel from others who have gone through similar difficulties. For example, look at online forums about procrastination.
- Make a list of the ways you habitually procrastinate and post it where you work.
- Avoid pre-identified risky situations. For example, if text messaging or social media is your problem, turn off your phone or use a focusing app (i.e. Flora) before you start your task.
- Remove distractions by making them less available. Make your bed as soon as you get out of it to reduce the temptation to get back in. Don't keep sugary or high fat foods in the pantry and go out if you want a treat. Set quiet times on your devices so that it is more difficult to stream video.
- Set yourself up for success by preparing for the moment. Put your workout clothes on first thing in the morning so that your mind is primed to follow through. Plan for and purchase all the ingredients you need to make those healthy meals at the beginning of the week so you won't be as tempted to order out.

### **Accepting That You're addicted to Delay**

You may need a heavy-duty technique when procrastination gets serious. Acknowledging your powerlessness over procrastination can paradoxically lead to its' reduction or elimination. Truly

acknowledging that any single failure of ‘willpower’ inevitably leads to the collapse of your self-control can give you far more motivation than believing that occasional lapses can be safely contained.

- Take a minute to reflect on how many times you have talked yourself out of your plans and into trouble. Start keeping a daily log to track your procrastination habits.
- Acknowledge that your biggest worry is your own perception of being “weak-willed”, that you *will* try to fool yourself into thinking “just this once.”
- Accept that the first delay allows you to justify, all the subsequent ones. By doing so, you will be far less likely to take that first step.

### **Games and Goals**

Finding ways to weave games and friendly competition into your work can make it more fun and motivating.

- Avoid boredom by making tasks more challenging. Games can come in handy and are only limited by your imagination. Almost any task can become a race to finish first or get the most work done. In competing against yourself, you could also try to finish the task in less time.
- Connect tasks to long-term goals, to what you find intrinsically motivating or to your values. For example, if you are a social person, you could frame cleaning your house as “providing an inviting home for family and friends to visit.”
- Frame your goals in terms of what you want to achieve rather than what you are trying to avoid. For example, think “I want to succeed” instead of “I don’t want to fail.”
- Use approach goals rather than avoidance goals. Instead of setting a goal of not beginning late set a goal of starting early.

### **Energy Crisis**

Being too tired is the number one reason given for procrastination. Fatigue increase task aversion, saps interest and makes the difficult task excruciating.

- Reserve your morning and mid-day peak performance hours for your most difficult tasks. This is typically when people have the most energy.
- Don’t let yourself get hungry. Graze on small nutritious snacks as needed.
- Make time for exercise several days each week by putting it on your schedule.
- Make sleep predictable, going to bed at the same time each night with a regular wind-down routine.
- Respect your limitations. If after all this, you are still too tired to tackle your tasks, try to cut back on your commitments or get help completing them.

### **You Should See the Task I’m Avoiding**

There are times you are avoiding the main task, but you are at least taking care of minutia. While this isn’t as constructive as tackling the real work, it does clear your plate of other obligations and puts you in a much better position to dig in when you are ready.

- Identify a target task that you ideally should be doing now but you have been putting off.
- Identify tangent tasks that also should be done and are *relatively* more enjoyable than your target task. You might be putting these off too.
- Accept the trade-off of avoiding that target task by tackling the tangent tasks. When you eventually get to the target task, you will be in a better position to complete it.

### **Double or Nothing**

A principal problem with procrastinators is that they tend not to reward themselves after completing a task, often failing to appreciate their own hard work. Internal self-praise is a costless incentive for overcoming a challenging task. Similarly, a self-administered reward can pull you through the drudgery of work toward a task's completion.

- Make a list of rewards you can administer to yourself, such as specific self-praise statements, frivolous purchases, or a night out, a vacation, new clothes, a special dinner etc.
- Promise yourself these rewards upon completion of the task you have been avoiding.
- Consider ways of making tasks more enjoyable, such as listening to music, sipping a specialty coffee/tea or working with a friend.
- Make sure that what makes the work more enjoyable, like partnering, doesn't override the work itself.

### **Let Your Passion Be Your Vocation**

Finding work you want to do is a major step toward avoiding procrastination. For many people, finding themselves and their calling is an ongoing struggle.

- Look at careers involving activities you love or like doing. Use online resources such as inventories and questionnaires to narrow your field.
- Filter out all the occupations for which you don't possess or aren't willing to learn the necessary skills or abilities.
- Rank the remaining careers by what is in demand. The harder the economic times, the fewer our choices will be.
- If you need help answering any of these questions, find a reputable career service for employment advice, i.e. Career Vision at [www.careervision.org](http://www.careervision.org).
- Start job hunting. Use personal contacts, social media applications like LinkedIn or enlist the aid of a recruiter.

### **Commit Now to Bondage, Satiation and Poison**

Standing between us and our aspirations are our distractions: the television, video game, desert table, etc. We wake in the morning with a clear desire to hit the gym in the afternoon only to succumb to the temptation of the immediately available. If you can anticipate these powerful temptations, you can act in advance to ward them off by using the concept of *pre-commitment*.

- **Bondage:** Put temptations out of reach or at least far away. For example, delete games on your phone or disable your internet. Use apps to set quiet times, delete games on your phone, or unplug the television.
- **Satiation:** Satisfy your needs before they get too intense and distract you from your work. Ironically, you can often work harder if you first schedule in some time for leisure. Try using an *unschedule* by scheduling your recreational activities in your calendar first and then pencil in your chores.
- **Poison:** Add disincentives to your temptations to make them sufficiently unattractive. For example, a monetary bet with someone else that you won't give into your temptation can be applied to almost anything.

## **Make Paying Attention Pay**

Distractions are a major enabler of procrastination, so learning how to effectively handle them is a must. Your options are to depreciate, eliminate or replace cues that remind you of your temptations.

- Spoil tempting alternatives by using covert-sensitization, imagining disgusting ways they may be tainted, or envision possible disastrous outcomes from procrastinating. The more vividly you can imagine the contamination or the catastrophe, the more effective this technique will be.
- When confronted with distracting temptations, focus on their most abstract aspects. Triple chocolate cheesecake, for example, can be visualized as just a compilation of fats and sugars.
- Entirely eliminate cues that remind you of distracting alternatives where possible. Keeping your workplace clear of clutter will help you accomplish this.
- Once you have purged your space from distracting cues, replace them with meaningful messages or pictures that remind you of why and what you are working towards. For example, a desk photo of a loved, a picture of the vacation you want to take, or inspirational quote can be an effective reminder.
- Foster work cues by compartmentalizing your place of work and play – keep them as separate as possible.

## **Scoring Goals**

Goal setting is the smartest thing you can do to battle procrastination.

- Frame your goals in specific terms so that you know exactly when you must achieve them. What exactly do you have to do? And when do you have to do it by? Instead of “Do my expense report” it should be “gather all my receipts, itemize and record them by lunchtime tomorrow.”
- Break down long-term goals into a series of short-term objectives. For particularly daunting tasks, begin with a mini-goal to break the motivational surface tension. For example, a goal of tackling just the first few pages of any required reading can often be enough to get you to finish the entire text.
- Organize your goals into routines that occur regularly at the same time and place. Predictability and routine optimize success, so open your schedule and pencil in re-occurring tasks.
- Use a goal setting app to create accountability and structure (i.e. StickK).