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Practice

Procrastination is not laziness: how to understand it and how to stop it

What the research of Piers Steel and Tim Pychyl shows: procrastination as a way of avoiding unpleasant feelings

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We know we should start. We know that the longer we put it off, the worse it will be. And yet we open another tab, check the phone, tidy the desk. After a while we feel guilty, and the guilt makes starting even harder.

What procrastination is

Psychologists define procrastination as voluntarily delaying an intended action despite knowing that the delay will harm us. This distinction matters: not every delay is procrastination. Waiting for more information before a decision can be wise.

In a broad meta-analysis in 2007, the Canadian psychologist Piers Steel combined hundreds of studies. Procrastination was most linked with tasks that seem unpleasant or boring, with rewards that come far in the future, with impulsiveness and with low belief that we will succeed.

A problem of feelings

The psychologists Fuschia Sirois and Tim Pychyl (2013) described procrastination as a form of emotion regulation. When a task causes us anxiety, boredom or uncertainty, delaying gives immediate relief. The relief is real, but short. Then come stress, guilt and a task that now looks even bigger. In other words, procrastination gives priority to our present feeling over the interest of our future self.

> *We do not put off the task. We put off the feeling the task gives us.*

Why guilt does not help

A study of university students led by Michael Wohl found that those who forgave themselves for procrastinating before a first exam procrastinated less when studying for the second. Harsh self-criticism, by contrast, adds to the unpleasant feeling attached to the task, and so to the wish to avoid it.

How common it is

Procrastination is not a minority problem. In his 2007 review the Canadian psychologist Piers Steel estimated that the overwhelming majority of university students put off work at least from time to time, while about 15 to 20 per cent of adults describe themselves as chronic procrastinators. He also found that procrastination is linked more to impulsiveness and to difficulty pursuing distant goals than to a lack of ability. In other words, people who put off work are not less intelligent; they are more drawn to immediate rewards.

The cost to health

Procrastination does not only cost grades or work. In 2023 Fred Johansson and colleagues followed more than three thousand Swedish students for nine months. Those

who procrastinated more at the start of the study later reported slightly more symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, worse sleep, more loneliness and more physical pain. The study does not prove that procrastination causes these problems, but it suggests it is not a harmless habit, especially when it becomes a way of life.

Deadlines we set ourselves

Do the deadlines we set ourselves help? In 2002 Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch asked students on a course to hand in three essays. Some students could set their own deadlines, others had equal deadlines spread across the semester, and others had only one deadline at the end. The students who set their own deadlines did better than those with a single deadline at the end, but worse than those with deadlines spread out by someone else. The lesson: self-imposed deadlines help, but people often set them less strictly than they should.

The future self as a stranger

An interesting explanation of procrastination comes from the studies of Hal Hershfield. He has shown that many people think of their future self almost as another person. That makes it easy to leave the unpleasant work to them. In a 2011 experiment, participants were shown computer images of their own face aged. Those who saw their future self decided to save more money for retirement. The practical idea is to think clearly about how "tomorrow's self" will feel on finding the unfinished work.

The power of starting

The Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik noticed in the 1920s that people remembered unfinished tasks better than finished ones, as if the mind kept an "open file" for every task begun. This idea, known as the Zeigarnik effect, has not always been confirmed in later replications, but it matches a common experience: the hardest part of a task is often the start. Once we have begun, even for a few minutes, the wish to finish makes continuing easier.

Five practical steps

1. **Name the feeling.** "I am putting it off because I do not know where to start" or "because I am afraid it will turn out badly". This makes the problem clearer.
2. **Make the first step ridiculously small.** Not "write the report", but "open the document and write the title".
3. **Set two minutes.** Tell yourself: I will work just two minutes, then I can stop. Often, once we start, we continue.

4. **Remove the nearest temptations.** Phone in another room, other tabs closed.
5. **Forgive yourself and start again.** Yesterday is yesterday. The only useful question is: what is the small step now?

If procrastination is constant and affects many areas of life, it may be linked with anxiety, depression or attention difficulties. In those cases professional help can make a big difference.

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