

Beating Procrastination, Increasing Productivity

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What is procrastination, and why should we care?

To procrastinate means "to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay" (Steel, 2007). Problematic procrastination is a *gap between intention and action*.

There are productive ways of delaying tasks, and healthy ways of not being productive. Those don't fall under the term "procrastination". Procrastinators feel bad about their decisions to delay—which helps distinguish procrastination from laziness.

Acts of omission lead to our biggest regrets in life!

- What about the claim that procrastination improves performance, because the imminent deadline creates excitement and pressure that elicit peak performance ("I do my best work under pressure")?
- Or what about the possibility that stress and illness caused by the last minute stress might be offset by the enjoyment of carefree times earlier?

Research shows that is not the case. For example:

- Procrastinators actually work worse under pressure than non-procrastinators (Ferrari, 2001).
- While procrastinating students reported lower stress and less illness than non-procrastinators early in the semester, they reported higher stress and more illness late in the term, and overall were sicker. They also received lower grades on all assignments (Tice & Baumeister, 1997).

→ Procrastination is a self-defeating behavior pattern marked by short-term benefits and long-term costs.

What is your own experience?

What would be different in your life if you procrastinated less? Or more?

So, what to do about it?

This program should get you started. Here is roughly what it will cover:

PART 1: General tips and tricks – how to prioritize and schedule

In case you have already tried all that:

PART 2: Two-step intervention program

1. Diagnose
2. Fix
(Repeat)

Suggestion: during Part I, highlight or take notes of the things you have NOT already been trying (or things you want to try again). Then choose 1-3 things you want to try next.

PART 1: General tips and tricks - how to prioritize and schedule

A. Prioritizing: Importance vs Urgency

Tasks that appear urgent are often not the most important ones in the long-term. It takes conscious effort to work towards important long-term goals, rather than on tasks that appear to be urgent, but are in fact less important (Covey, Merrill, & Merrill 1994).

Categorize your tasks - decide which ones are important vs. urgent

Covey came up with a 2x2 matrix (see template), in which Quadrant 2 has the items that are non-urgent but important. These are the ones we are likely to neglect, but should focus on to achieve effectiveness.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Crying baby Kitchen fire Some calls 1	Exercise Vocation Planning 2
Not Important	Interruptions Distractions Other calls 3	Trivia Busy work Time wasters 4

For your own matrix (see template):

1. Write down your to-do list on a separate sheet
2. Assign each of the items to a quadrant

What items are in your Quadrant 2?

[Don't have anything in Quadrant 2, or not happy with what's in there? Ask me for exercises on how to connect with your values, how to find your passion and intention, and how to set goals accordingly.]

Now schedule accordingly

What does that mean? Not the same for everybody!

But definitely:

- **Save prime energy time (for most people those are the morning hours) for Quadrant 2.**
 - If you tend to screw up really important and urgent stuff, also save prime time for Quadrant 1.
 - If on the other hand you're rather an overachiever who would never actually miss an important deadline or do poorly on a task for which you might get yelled at: DON'T make Quadrant 1 your priority. Save prime time for Quadrant 2, maybe even go out of your comfort zone by scheduling Quadrant 1 items more closely to the deadlines.
- **Minimize spending work time on Quadrants 3 and 4.**
 - Shield yourself from interruptions.
 - Save items from Quadrant 3 and 4 for breaks, if they are pleasurable.

What is your own tendency and danger zone? Which parts of the quadrant are you most likely to neglect, or spend too much time on?

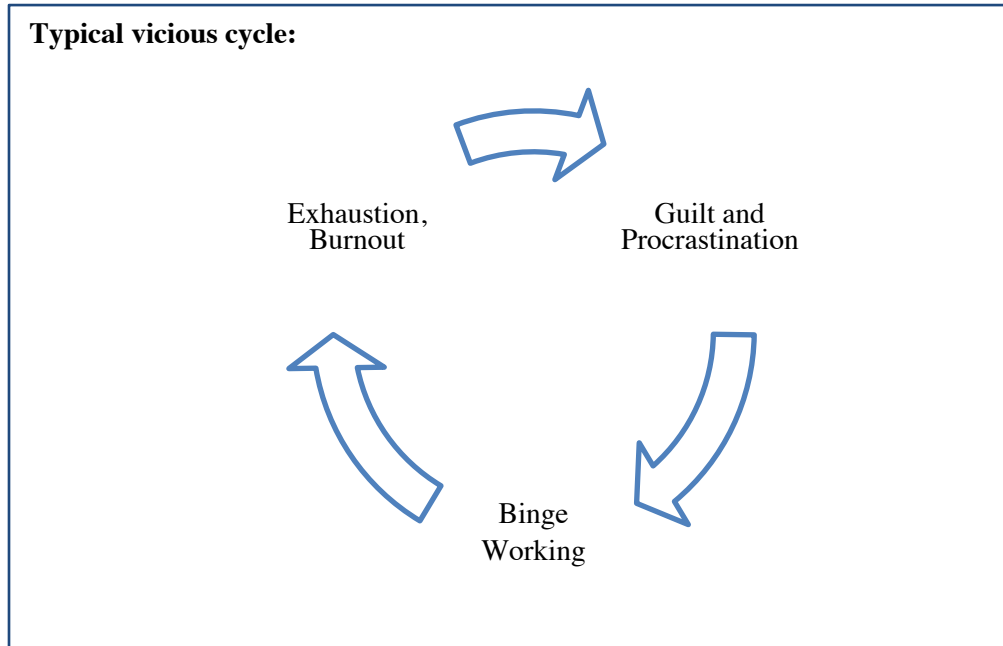
Where can you carve out (more) time for Quadrant 2?

How can you protect that time?

B. Schedule Effectively and Sustainably - The Art of Taking Breaks!

*"I can't find time to [...]"
"I would [...] more if I could just find some blocks of time."*

Those beliefs can be elevated to guiding life themes! (Silvia, 2007)



Don't binge!

Don't try to "find time": allot time instead.

→ **Schedule!!**

You can set either a block of time (e.g., 25min), or specific accomplishments (e.g., write one paragraph) as units. Then take a break.

For tasks you don't want to do, find something to look forward to after each unit.

- e.g., the "martini method" (<http://meganpower.blogspot.com/2010/12/martini-method.html>)
- e.g., the Pomodoro Technique®: 25 minutes work, 5 minutes break (<http://www.pomodortechnique.com>).

But in my experience, different people and tasks require different units! (I need longer and better breaks, for example... 😊)

If you have a hard time getting started:

→ try smaller time units, longer and better reward periods

For scary/difficult/very important stuff:

→ try smaller time units, longer and better reward periods

Divide and conquer: if you're "not in the mood", just do 15 minutes of something from Quadrant 2. *Just get started.* (Then take a break - not in the other order!)

Remember that it's a lot better to work just 30 minutes on something than not at all!

The more resistance you have, the more you need to *plan ahead*, make the work increments small enough, make the rewards attractive enough. Go easy with the plan, put in buffers, but stick to the core elements of your schedule (incl. your breaks).

Think of your items in Quadrants 1 or 2: what would be your ideal work unit in which those items should be scheduled, either in terms of time (e.g., minutes) or accomplishment (e.g., paragraphs written)?

How small would the units have to be so that you would have no problem getting started and keeping your concentration?

What kinds of breaks or rewards would work best for you?

List some rewards that would work after small work units, and some that would be appropriate for bigger accomplishments.

Be realistic:

When setting up those plans, be honest with yourself as to how much you can realistically get done. The standard of a 40-hour workweek is not a coincidence; it is the tried and tested limit of human productivity in the long run (Robinson, 2012). If you try to work more, productivity will actually go down.

For mental work, the limit is even lower: max 6 hours per day (and less for *hard* mental work, like writing papers or code or other creative output). So don't be fooled by people who say they work 8 hours a day, or 70 hours a week – nobody does. “Being at work” is not the same as “getting work done”!

Take into account *Hofstadter's Law*, and then some:

*“It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter's Law.”
(Hofstadter, 1999)*

Also known as the “planning fallacy” (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979): individuals as well as organizations tend to underestimate how long it will take to complete a task, even if they're aware of that very problem.

→ Have mandatory as well as flexible items in your schedule. Treat your most important tasks (Quadrant 2) as appointments, schedule them ahead of time and don't move them around.

For important deadlines, set your own deadline earlier than the actual one, but make your fake deadline real by scheduling something fun that you only get to do if you achieve your goal.

“Big carrots can double as sticks...” (Silvia, 2007)

C. Make It All Easier

Avoid decision fatigue and depletion of self-control, that is, avoid having to make too many decisions throughout the day (Hagger et al., 2010).

→ You want to save all your self-control (brain power) to concentrate on the actual task.

Temporal construal theory (e.g., Trope & Liberman, 2000):

When we're further away from a decision, we find it easy to focus on the big picture and know what's best for us

- e.g., be productive, eat healthy, work out, ...

As we get closer, we're more likely to choose what feels good in the moment

- e.g., watch the funny video, eat the chocolate cake, avoid discomfort, ...

- **Plan and decide ahead of time.** Set your minimal schedule the day before (but be realistic!), then no more decisions/rescheduling for those core tasks.
 - Plan your mealtimes (planned meal breaks are great rewards, as well as important for avoiding decision fatigue). Plan enough healthy and satisfying meals/snacks to avoid those trips to the kitchen and decisions in front of the fridge.
- **Form “implementation intentions”** (Gollwitzer, & Brandstätter, 1997; Gollwitzer, 1999): rather than forming goal intentions ("I intend to achieve *x*"), form implementation intentions ("I intend to perform specific goal-directed behavior *y* when I encounter situation *z*").

Goal intentions (more general)	Implementation Intentions (more specific)
e.g., "I want to get in touch with this employer"	=> if situation, then behavior e.g., "Tomorrow right after coming home from work and before dinner I will write this employer an email"

Implementation intentions are particularly effective for

- goals that are associated with disagreeable tasks
 - homework, phone calls, job applications
- goals that are easily forgotten
- people for whom realizing plans is especially difficult
 - e.g, depression or other psychological problems, drug addiction, etc.

“Script the critical Moves. Don’t think big picture, think in terms of specific behaviors.”

(Heath & Heath, 2010)

Form one implementation intention for a short-term goal, e.g., something you want to do this week:
If/when ... , I will ...

- **Get into habits.** When behavior is habitual, it's "free" — it doesn't tax the Rider.
Look for ways to encourage habits:
 - E.g., writing from 8-10 each weekday
 - Using your commute as a workout opportunity (biking, walking, stairs)
 - Setting "action triggers"
 - Using checklists

- **Optimize transaction costs**, that is, "mold your life so that the *path of least resistance is the path of maximum productivity*" (Might, 2012).
 1. Reduce transaction costs to engaging in productive behavior.
 - Make your workspace attractive and conducive to working (your room, desk, but also computer screen...).
 - Before you take a break, know exactly what you'll do next when you come back.

 2. Increase transaction costs to engaging in counter-productive behavior (i.e., reduce temptation).
 - Separate your workspace from relaxation space.
 - Put yourself in airplane mode during work hours.
 - Restrict access to certain websites to certain times (more radical: block entirely, go back to newspaper).
 - Use different accounts for working than for games etc. (more radical: get rid of games and TV).

- **Get a good system**
 - Efficient checklist, e.g. daily (weekly) check-off cards (see template below)
 - White board, graph paper, or whatever you will actually look at and work with
 - Synch calendars
 - Deal efficiently with your (flood of) emails:
 - **Inbox Zero** (<http://inboxzero.com>): how to keep your Inbox empty and not spend time re-reading and re-considering emails without answering them
 - Apply the Inbox Zero principle to other tasks (get the task out of your mind immediately by either getting it done right away, scheduling it, or deciding not to do it)
 - *"That Zero? It's not how many messages are in your inbox – it's how much of your own brain is in that inbox."* (Mann, 2012)

→ All this affects decision fatigue: get a system that helps you NOT to think about tasks you're not currently doing.

*"Tweak the environment. When the situation changes, the behavior changes. So change the situation."
(Heath & Heath, 2010)*

If a genie granted you the ability to adopt one specific new habit, what would that be?

What change in your environment could promote that new habit?

What if you have already been trying all of the above, but it just doesn't work?

PART 2: Two-step intervention program

1. Diagnose

2. Fix

(Repeat)

Step 1 - Diagnose

Become more aware of what your obstacles are (every person is different). What triggers your procrastination? Procrastination is at it's worst when we're not aware of it.

Keep a productivity journal (see template):

For every day, write a to do list and schedule the day before. Next to the planned schedule, have an empty schedule. During the day: cross off what you have done from the list, and write into the empty schedule what you actually did.

---- Warning: this may be painful! ----

Make notes of what happened when you did or didn't stay on track. If there were no outside interruptions, what were your *thoughts* when you did something else than what you intended?

Another way to find triggers is to take a look at your past:

- What were times when you were most/least productive?
- What was different then?

→ *"Investigate what's working and clone it."* (Heath & Heath, 2010).

Frequent triggers for procrastination are:

<p>Obstacles: = task-related</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• actually disagreeable task<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ boring, physically painful, humiliating• fear• "self-handicapping": not putting in effort so you'll have an excuse for failure (Jones & Berglas, 1978)• uncertainty, confusion• lack of skills, not knowing how to do it• lack of purpose, motivation or passion<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ doubts about whether you're on the right track (uncertainty if your work will lead to long-term success)• resentment ("I shouldn't have to do this")• exhaustion• lack of urgency<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ deadline that is too far away○ no accountability/supervision, too much freedom	<p>"Sirens": = distraction-related (pull or "stickiness" of other activities)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• other things you could do that are more fun than the task• interruptions• addictive distractions (gaming, TV, ...)• daydreaming• hunger• inertia, e.g., not getting out of bed or off the couch
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Step 2 - Fix

Try an intervention, targeted at one trigger/obstacle at a time. See it as an experiment that you do with yourself. Whatever you try, do it for at least one week, better three.

Examples

If the trigger is fear:

- Divide and conquer, start with the easiest part (or with the scariest... again, there is not one best strategy for everybody).
- Don't aim for perfection.
- Do one scary thing per day (e.g., make a daily checklist for little things to get done every day, see template below, adapted from Cox, 2012).

If the problem is that you never get started:

- Get up one hour earlier, do one work unit (small task, or 30min) before breakfast. Try for one entire week.

If the task is boring or otherwise painful:

- Try to make it more attractive by turning it into a game, listening to music, get company.
- Cut it into shorter units; find better rewards.

If the problem is lack of skills:

- Get training.
- Delegate.

If the problem is confusion, uncertainty:

- Write a very specific list as a way of finding out what needs to be done.

If the problem are fun distractions:

- Use them as rewards.

If the problem is lack of urgency, deadlines that are too far away:

- Set earlier deadlines for partial achievements; get accountability by sending somebody results in between (supervisor, coach).
- Find a partner to work with and check in on a regular basis (or get a coach to check in on the phone).

If the problem is that you're spending too much time with email interruptions:

- Implement "Inbox Zero": <http://inboxzero.com>.

(Repeat)

Remember that this is an experimental approach! Whatever you try, look at it as an experiment that may succeed or fail. Either way, you learned something important that will help you fine-tune your work habits.

If you don't see progress after Step 1 and 2 (or if you feel there could be even more progress), repeat and try something else. If Step 1 gave you a lot to work with, you may only need to repeat Step 2.

Also, remember that it probably takes at least 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert on anything difficult (Gladwell, 2011). Avoiding procrastination is an inherently difficult skill, so be patient with yourself and don't give up if things don't improve right away. Take on your next trigger/obstacle and try the next intervention.

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Important vs Urgent - 2x2 matrix (adapted from Covey, Merrill, & Merrill 1994)

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	1	2
Not Important	3	4

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Crying baby Kitchen fire Some calls 1	Exercise Vocation Planning 2
Not Important	3 Interruptions Distractions Other calls	4 Trivia Busy work Time wasters

Adapted from: Stephen Covey, A. Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill, First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.

Productivity Journal

Date:

Planned Day		Actual Day		Notes
Time	Activity (To Do)	Time	Activity (Did)	
				<p>What happened? What were obstacles, procrastination triggers, successes, reasons for failures?</p>