Eliminating Procrastination Without Putting It Off

Ross Van Ness
ROSS VAN NESS

Ross Van Ness is professor of Adult and Community Education at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, where he also serves as director of Continuing Professional Education in the School of Continuing Education. In his public school career he has been a music teacher, music supervisor, school administrator, and adult educator. A native of Michigan, Van Ness earned his Bachelor of Music from Western Michigan University and his M.A. in music education and doctorate in educational administration from the University of Michigan.

Van Ness has served as a seminar leader/speaker in 23 states and four foreign countries. He is past president of the Indiana Community Education Association and the Indiana Association of Adult and Continuing Education. He is the author of *I Win, You Win: Turning Conflict to Your Advantage*.

In his few leisure moments, he enjoys reading, racquetball, fishing, painting, and communing with nature.

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by

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The chapter proudly sponsors this fastback to honor J.J. Maurer, a retired secondary school mathematics teacher and charter member of this chapter. An active member of Phi Delta Kappa since 1946, Mr. Maurer’s service to this chapter as historian and editor of its award-winning newsletter for 22 years exemplifies his dedication to the ideals of education and to Phi Delta Kappa. His energetic involvement in all areas of Phi Delta Kappa’s activities serves as a model for all members.
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The Frustration and Cost of Procrastination

A teacher I once knew would easily have won the procrastinator-of-the-year award. However, he never would have gotten around to picking it up! As educators, we know that putting off what is necessary or important to do is as frustrating to ourselves as it is to others. The pattern of delay, hesitation, hedging, or putting off followed by the promise that tomorrow will be different is painfully familiar to most of us. Procrastination is like some demon that paralyzes us from carrying out a task we have promised to do. As the cartoon character Ziggy says, “I face my problems one tomorrow at a time.” Take heart! It is possible to overcome procrastination.

Every habit is a choice repeated many times. When the choice was made the first time, it may have been difficult. Each time the choice was repeated, however, it became easier until eventually it felt quite natural. Once a habit has become established, it is difficult to unseat because all the repeated choices must be overcome. Yet, each of us has an amazing capacity to change. Through insight, new awareness, determination, practice, and self-reward, any behavior pattern can be altered. Procrastination is no exception.

All procrastination, however, is not the result of habit. Deep-seated psychological hurts or the emotional scars from painful events in the past may cause us to hesitate, delay, or otherwise postpone action, because a part of us is afraid of the consequences of doing something that will again be unpleasant. It often becomes easier to accept the
consequences of procrastinating than to do what is perceived to be unpleasant.

I observed this syndrome in a young elementary principal, who wanted to open his own summer camp for inner-city youth. He talked often of developing a wooded area on a lake owned by his uncle into such a camp. But subconsciously he vividly remembered that his father’s three businesses had failed, one after another. He knew what had to be done to open his own camp. He had completed three years of college as a business major before transferring to education, and he had extensive practical experience from working at other summer camps. Yet he delayed taking the initial step because of the fear that his camp, like his father’s businesses, might not succeed. Thus, he never “got around” to opening his camp. Procrastination was not an ongoing pattern in this young man’s professional life, yet in this one area he put off making a commitment and following through on it because a psychological scar held him back.

Procrastination exists in degrees. For some it may be only an occasional delay; for others it is a continuing habit. But it can be eliminated. There are many people who simply go ahead and do things without guilt-producing self-promises of “I should do this,” or “Sometime I’ll get to it.” These people make a deliberate commitment to do a task, set aside a specific time to do it, then follow through on the commitment. Or they consciously choose not to do it.

Procrastination Defined

Procrastination is avoiding or delaying a task that needs to be done. The effect of avoidance or delay is the same — the needed or desired project is not accomplished. Procrastination differs from non-success. With procrastination a task is never set in motion; or if it is begun, it is interrupted and then not resumed. With non-success, circumstances may hinder or prevent success, but not because of lack of effort or giving it one’s “best shot.” Vince Lombardi said his football teams never “lost” — they either won or didn’t win. To him there was
no such thing as "failure," only success yet to be achieved. We do not "fail" if we put forth every reasonable effort. What is crucial is to act rather than intend to act.

This does not mean that a doer rushes headlong into every needed task and carries it out without delay. Living is a series of choices. Some choices, such as caring for an injured student or responding to an angry parent are made almost automatically. On the other hand, the choice to move into administration or to leave your present school are choices that require more consideration. There is sometimes a fine line between procrastination and waiting until all known factors and probable consequences have been considered. The doer will have a time-line to gather needed information and will make a conscious choice after reasonable deliberation. The procrastinator, on the other hand, will use "reasonable deliberation" as an excuse to postpone a decision or to delay carrying out a decision already made. "I never knew a difficult choice to get easier with age," said an experienced principal. New information or deeper insight may help, but letting a decision wait until "later" postpones the chance for success and sustains the mental anguish that comes with indecision.

Some persons are naturally more cautious than others and cannot comfortably start any project until all the steps to completion are clearly in mind. The point is not that people should act prematurely and embark on more than they can reasonably accomplish. Indeed, overcommitment can be as destructive as indecisiveness. Rather, the goal is to develop a pattern of prompt deliberation and then decision.

Most procrastination results not from an inability to choose but from unwillingness to choose. "I tell myself I'm going to exercise," lamented a female art teacher in the faculty lounge, "Yet I just can't seem to work it into my schedule." "I know what you mean," nodded the male social studies teacher next to her, "I've promised my wife for two years I would build shelves for the pantry, and it seems as though there's always something more important to do." The art teacher eventually came to realize that, because of being overweight, she had been
too embarrassed to exercise in front of others at the local health spa and had not developed the self-motivation to maintain an exercise schedule on her own at home. The social studies teacher finally admitted what really held him back was his wife’s criticism of anything he attempted in the line of home improvements. She complained bitterly if he didn’t undertake a project, yet found fault with everything he did complete. He could tolerate nagging better than criticism.

The Effects of Procrastination

Procrastination has many unpleasant consequences. At the time of postponement the consequences may not seem costly; but when we are standing in a long line because we delayed getting new auto license plates until the day before they expired, we realize the consequences of having vacillated on an activity and vow not to repeat our postponement. Some of the negative outcomes of procrastinating are:

1. It leaves important tasks undone or done poorly because they were rushed through at the last minute.
2. It creates personal anguish, including guilt, anxiety, and often mild panic during the period of delay.
3. It often requires extra effort because the delay makes the postponed task more difficult to accomplish.
4. Penalties often result from the task undone or shabbily done.
5. Opportunities may be lost because failure to complete the task leaves the procrastinator unprepared or lacking experience.
6. Personal and professional relationships may deteriorate because others become angry or frustrated at recurring delays.
7. It causes lowered self-esteem because of negative feelings resulting from non-achievement, poor results, criticism, or penalties.

Procrastinators are like persons who drink. There is the social procrastinator, the heavy procrastinator, the problem procrastinator, and the “procrastaholic.” And like those who drink excessively, procrastinators must be willing to work on the problem conscientiously
in the less advanced stages and to acknowledge the need for help at more advanced stages. At any stage, the first step is willingness to admit a problem exists, then to commit to a new behavior pattern.

**The Fallacy of “I Don’t Have Time”**

Procrastinators often give the response, “I didn’t have time,” as the reason for delaying action. Actually, we all have the same amount of time — there are 168 hours a week. In this regard, everyone is truly created equal. Since we all have all the time available, a more truthful statement would be, “I didn’t give that activity high enough priority to make the time to complete it.”

Our energies are given to what we consider priority activities. If we watch TV or play golf rather than plant the garden, we cannot truthfully say we did not have time to plant the garden. We simply used the time for an activity to which we gave higher priority. A teacher with three preschool children has the same amount of time available to her as a single teacher who devotes a minimum amount of time to lesson preparations and rebuilds old cars. The tasks involved in being a conscientious educator and in caring for three small children simply become the priority activities. When the mother says, “I don’t have time,” she means the many responsibilities involving teaching and caring for her children take precedence over activities that do not involve her profession or her children. When the single teacher pleads “not enough time” to serve on the curriculum committee, he means he did not consider it as important or desirable as rebuilding cars. People give their time and energy to what they consider important.

While everyone has the same amount of total time available, individuals differ in their amounts of discretionary time. The procrastinator uses the fact that there is less discretionary time than desired as an excuse for not doing a needed task. Busy educators, who have little discretionary time, often exercise better judgment in their use of time than those with fewer responsibilities and larger amounts of discretionary time.
Many persons complain they cannot get necessary or desirable tasks completed because of “demands” on their time by other people. So-called demands fall into three categories: non-negotiable responsibilities, negotiable responsibilities, and requests. Such tasks as developing lesson plans or preparing the budget must be done and are non-negotiable. (This is not to deny that much time can be spent “stewing” over such tasks rather than doing them.) Failure to complete non-negotiable tasks can have serious consequences, including jeopardizing one’s livelihood.

Negotiable responsibilities are those that are necessary, yet might be scaled down, eliminated, performed less often, or done by someone else. Dinner must be prepared. However, on any given night: 1) the other spouse can prepare the meal; 2) dinner may be a shared project, reducing preparation time for each partner; 3) convenience food requiring only warming in the microwave oven can be served; or 4) dinner can be eaten at a restaurant.

Requests are solicitations for help or self-imposed obligations. The person being asked for help always has the option of saying, “No.” Serving on a committee, helping a failing student, and going with an aunt to a court hearing are all noble, kind, and helpful acts. But each should be regarded as a request rather than an obligation or demand. Saying yes to all three instead of completing an important report for the school board, which is due tomorrow, is a decision to give the report low priority rather than an excuse of “not having enough time.”

By working to hold non-negotiable demands to a minimum, by reducing negotiable demands, and by treating requests as favors to be given rather than demands to be met, discretionary time can be increased. Thus “not having enough time” as an excuse for procrastination can be put to rest.

Eliminating procrastination is a do-it-yourself project. It requires replacing patterns of delaying behavior with prompt and realistic action. How long and difficult this replacement process will be depends
on how severe our delaying behavior has become and how committed we are to overcoming the problem. By using some simple techniques described in the pages to follow, educators can eliminate procrastination — without putting it off.
The Roots of Procrastination

I sat in the office of a school superintendent on whose desk was a small, cube-shaped black box. "What does that do?" I asked. "Push the button and see," he responded. I punched the single button on the front of the box. It began to whirr, its top opened, and the replica of a human hand slowly emerged. The hand glided up out of the box, extended over the front edge, and the forefinger pushed the button. The hand then receded into the box, the cover closed, and the whirring sound ceased. Here was a device whose sole function was to turn itself off! Many educators are like that box. They do not intend to turn themselves off, yet they are uncannily effective in doing so.

Procrastination turns off achievement by delaying initial action. It shuts down accomplishment by inserting "good" reasons why the action should be done later or by allowing routine and mundane tasks to consume inordinate amounts of time. Procrastination is a two-headed monster. It plagues us with self-guilt and resentment all the while we are postponing action; then it leaves us in a crisis situation when the task has to be completed at the last minute.

We tend to talk about procrastination as a problem without dealing with its root causes. We attribute the tendency to put things off to laziness, apathy, or disorganization. While any of these may be exhibited in the procrastinator, rarely are they the sole cause of a chronic pattern of delayed action. Rather, they are symptoms associated with procrastinating behavior.

People are not born procrastinators. Watch any toddler to see the naturally curious, energetic human organism in action. The young child postpones almost nothing, unless forced to do so by an adult.
Even when confronted with a number of attractive choices, young children do not sit and do nothing while analyzing all the possibilities. They quickly choose the most appealing activity, engage in it, and then go on to other activities, one after another. Admittedly, the young child deals primarily with what psychologists call approach-approach situations. That is, all choices the child makes are desirable and appealing. In contrast, adults must deal with approach-avoidance situations, where both appealing and unappealing choices exist, and with avoidance-avoidance situations, where all choices seem difficult or unattractive. And they must select the least-worst option. Adults have learned to examine the consequences of each choice, whereas the child delights only in the pleasure of the moment.

When we are confronted with a task, the natural sequence is to examine the factors related to carrying out the task and then to take action. However, the mental ability that allows us to reason and choose intelligently also allows us to rationalize excuses for not taking action. When these excuses become a pattern, they block prompt decision and procrastination sets in.

Procrastinating behavior has its roots in dislike, fear, or doubt. Each of these root causes will be discussed later and antidotes suggested. However, the first step in eliminating procrastination is admitting there is a problem and then going on to determine precisely the cause or causes of the problem.

Each instance of procrastination must be examined independently for cause. A teacher may postpone figuring final grades because it is unpleasant, avoid a computer literacy class because of fear of computers, or put off qualifying for an administrator’s license because of doubt about ability to fulfill the new responsibilities. At times, fear and doubt blur, which make them difficult to separate. By identifying and acknowledging the precise cause of each instance of procrastination, a person can determine what are the most frequent causes and also gain some insight into how deeply ingrained a pattern of behavior is related to a cause.
Doing the DUD’s: Difficult, Uninteresting, and Distasteful

When confronted with several tasks that need doing, the natural tendency is to gravitate away from activities that are difficult, uninteresting, or distasteful (DUD’s) and toward those that are low-effort, easy, or short (LES). Thus, we go through life avoiding or postponing the DUD’s by doing LES! Changing furnace filters, preparing lesson plans, and doing income taxes are all DUD’s. It is easy to find one or more LES activities to engage in while convincing ourselves to do the DUD later, knowing full well that when “later” comes we will find another LES activity to substitute and thus continue the pattern of delay.

We also are drawn to high-interest activities that are fun, appealing, or desirable (FAD’s). Neither LES nor FAD activities are necessarily bad. They may, in fact, be necessary maintenance chores or projects that help move us toward a rewarding goal. Nevertheless, they should not be used as excuses to avoid doing one or more DUD’s.

Putting off the tough, nasty, or dull jobs is, for most of us, as irritating to ourselves as to others. We dislike ourselves for delaying, yet postpone anyway. It is a behavior that is self-punishing as well as counterproductive. The furnace filter eventually will have to be changed if the house is to be heated adequately. However, because the filters do not come out easily (difficult), are not exciting (uninteresting), and are always dirty (distasteful), we put off replacing them. They are a DUD. Meanwhile the house becomes dusty, the furnace
works harder, a nagging conscience (or spouse) becomes irritating, and the filters become dirtier than ever. Yet with a 10-minute effort, all the costs of delay could be avoided.

Four factors are involved in the choice to act rather than procrastinate on DUD’s: 1) the strength of the delaying pattern; 2) the degree of difficulty, dullness, or distaste associated with the activity; 3) the urgency or necessity of the task; and 4) the benefits, rewards, and satisfaction for completion.

*The Strength of the Delaying Pattern.* When procrastination becomes a pattern, the tendency is to settle resignedly into a rut with the excuse, “That’s the way I am.” The way we are is whatever way we choose to make ourselves. Although some behavior is strongly influenced by past training or experiences, each of us makes decisions about our behavior every minute of our lives. Believing we are congenital procrastinators is a convenient way of refusing to take responsibility for our own choices.

A man brought his boss, who had a reputation as a grouch and cynic, home for dinner. After listening to the complaints and caustic comments of his father's boss for an hour, the six-year-old of the house approached the guest cautiously.

“My daddy says you're a self-made man.”

“That’s right,” beamed the visitor, “I am.”

“Then why,” asked the lad ingenuously, “did you make yourself the way you are?”

We well might ask why we have made ourselves into the procrastinators we are. If procrastination has become a habitual pattern, we not only allowed it, we “grew” it. Yet, it can be replaced by a different habit. Since each of us is “self-made,” we can become “self-re-made.” We delude ourselves if we believe our actions are set in concrete. Behavior patterns of delay may seem as strong as concrete, yet even concrete can be broken up and replaced.

*How Difficult, Uninteresting, or Distasteful?* The world is filled with tasks that are not easy, exciting, or pleasant, yet are quite neces-
sary. The optimist says the glass is half full; the pessimist says it is half empty; the realist says it has four fluid ounces! Whether tasks are hard or easy, dull or interesting, appealing or repulsive, they are there to be done. They will not go away. In fact, a project put aside is apt to increase in difficulty. Delay will not decrease its difficulty or increase its interest or appeal.

The best way to be rid of uninteresting or distasteful tasks is to do them. A task put off is like a boomerang — it comes around and hits you just when you think you have pitched it aside. The mental energy used to avoid or put off these DUD's can far exceed the effort needed simply to do them on schedule.

Urgency, Cost, and Necessity. "About the only thing that guy doesn't postpone is breathing," quipped a principal concerning one of his custodians. Urgent matters are seldom postponed. The teacher who delays writing a report would not think of postponing a court summons for jury duty, although both may be equally distasteful to that person. The school business manager who avoids returning a phone call to his ex-wife's lawyer always returns a call from his demanding superintendent, even though both calls are likely to bring unpleasant news.

Avoidance of negative consequences can be motivation for doing a task promptly. However, if this is the only motivation driving a person, then procrastination will persist because important tasks that carry a low-cost penalty for delay will be put off until they develop severe consequences.

Benefits, Rewards, and Satisfaction. The best way to get DUD tasks accomplished is to focus on the benefits, rewards, and satisfactions derived from completing the tasks. There are rewards in every task, even mundane ones like cleaning the oven or mowing the lawn. Promptly attacking these necessary tasks does reward us by avoiding the penalties of postponement (a smoky oven or ankle-high grass) as well as by eliminating the anguish of nagging at ourselves (or by others). We are also rewarded by the satisfaction of accomplishment and by being free of the DUD to pursue other activities.
For some people replacing a faucet washer or waxing the car are DUD's. Focusing on the pride of having a shiny car and a faucet that does not leak can negate the drudgery of the work involved. Satisfaction from completing a task far outweighs the difficulty or distaste of doing many DUD chores; yet we tend to dwell on the unpleasant or sweat-producing aspects of completing the job rather than the glow that comes with successful accomplishment.

Probably the siren call of procrastination sounds most strongly when we do not know how to accomplish a DUD task. It becomes very tempting to put off replacing the faucet washer if we have never replaced one and are insecure about how to proceed. When, after consulting a home repair manual, the faucet washer is replaced, there is a double reward of mastering a new skill and completing a needed activity. Washing the windows, on the other hand, involves no special skill — only the pleasure of sparkling windows.

The Secret of Completing DUD Tasks

The most effective method of dealing with unappealing or tough jobs is to do them early in the day. Eat a live toad first thing each morning, and nothing worse will happen the rest of the day! If we do one unpleasant, difficult, or messy chore early in the day, the rest of that day will be easy going. This bit of advice makes so much sense it is surprising that more people do not follow it. If one heeds this advice just during weekdays, then five difficult or unpleasant tasks will be accomplished each week. Most of us do not have more than five truly DUD jobs each week; we have one repulsive task put off five times! For those who do have more than five DUD’s a week, then two “live toads” some days may be necessary.

Non-procrastinators accept the fact that DUD jobs do exist, are necessary, and will not disappear or diminish over time. They then free themselves of all negative consequences that come with avoidance and delay by doing the DUD’s before partaking of LES and FAD activities.
Some other helpful strategies to eliminate procrastinating on DUD's are:

1. Admit the task is important or needs to be done. Kidding ourselves that an unpleasant job really is not necessary does not change its importance.

2. Do not magnify the difficulties or distastefulness of a task. It is easy to let the unpleasant aspects of a job be blown out of proportion by dwelling on them in advance.

3. Don’t blame others for a personal choice to procrastinate. It is easy to justify not enrolling in an inservice course because there are “too many things to do for the family.” Instead, enlist the aid of family members, omit some LES activities, and make the time. As Robert Schuller advises: “Don’t fix the blame, fix the problem!”

4. Schedule the task. If you cannot “eat your live toad” first thing in the morning, establish a time when you can “eat it,” then stick to the schedule.

5. Replace “I don’t have time” with “I can’t give that high enough priority.” In truth, we make time for those tasks that we believe are necessary, that someone requires us to do, or that we are motivated to do. If the task is not high enough on our own priority list, admit it and consciously discard the task, or re-order your priorities. If other persons take your time with tasks they want done, you can refuse them; or at least discuss with them your reasons why you cannot give their tasks high priority.

6. Recognize the “law of exclusive choice.” When you choose any activity, you must exclude other activities until a later time. When you deliberately choose to do a task, follow through on the commitment. Otherwise LES and FAD activities will intervene and consume the available time.
The Five D’s of Task Management

Managing any task can lead to one of five courses of action: do, drop, delegate, defer, or delay. With DUD’s the appropriate choice is one of the first four. We may do the task at the earliest feasible time, decide not to do it (and accept the consequences), assign it to someone else, or defer it to a specific later time and do it at that time. Delay is the one option that results in a “no-win” result. Delay only postpones the eventual necessity of choosing one of the other four options.

Even with the first four options, problems can arise. Changing circumstances may prevent you from doing the task now; dropping the task may backfire if it turns out to be a critical need (when a toothache recurs with excruciating pain, the choice not to go to the dentist is quickly reversed); delegating does not ensure that the task either will be done by the specified deadline or will meet expected standards; deferring to a later time carries the risk that other duties will interfere with completing the task on schedule. Nevertheless, any of these four options is preferable to delay, since with delay one of the other four eventually will be required.

DUD’s can be dispatched without procrastination. By scheduling them early, by focusing on the rewards of accomplishment, and by not allowing LES and FAD activities to fill available time, an irritating behavior pattern can be replaced with a satisfying one — one that carries the stamp of “DONE.”
Managing Fears that Cause Procrastination

Fear can be either a straightjacket that restrains us from beginning an activity or a brake pedal that slows us from completing a project already begun. Fear can range from a gnawing discomfort to panic or hysteria. Fears are sometimes manifested by such symptoms as anxiety, depression, compulsion, physical ailments, or irritating negative behavior. Either fear itself or one of these symptoms produced by fear can prevent us from accomplishing necessary or desired tasks.

Milder expressions of fear such as feelings of uneasiness or vague discomfort may not be recognized as the cause of procrastination. For example, a teacher felt strongly his school’s policy of automatically lowering students’ grades after a specified number of unexcused absences was unjust and an inappropriate form of discipline, yet he repeatedly put off telling the administration about his views. When he finally analyzed his intense feelings about the situation, he came to realize that at the root of his procrastination was his fear of expressing his views to persons in authority.

Fear is a useful emotion if it is related to a threat to physical safety or involves a risk to someone or something we value highly. A professor friend recently postponed moving a downed electrical wire after a thunderstorm because he was afraid it was “live.” A superintendent attending a convention in Las Vegas avoided the high stakes blackjack table because he feared he might lose more money than he could afford. These fears were justified.
Many fears, however, stem from what could or might happen. It is the anticipation of these fears, not their certainty, that deters us from action because we might experience rejection, criticism, embarrassment, loss of pride, or a bruised ego. A great many of these fears are more imagined than real. And even fears that are legitimate can be neutralized by early and thoughtful effort — a behavior pattern that procrastination tends to deter. Many educators, for example, will avoid speaking in public because they fear that what they have to say will be criticized or rejected. Such a fear is almost entirely self-manufactured. Listeners want a speaker to succeed, not stumble. An audience is with a speaker, at least at the outset. The only “dangers” are that the speaker may not be interesting, that the delivery is uninspiring, or that some listeners will disagree with the speaker. The first two factors are entirely within the control of the speaker, and the third is a matter of distinguishing disagreement from rejection. Thus the fear of speaking poorly in public can be counteracted with adequate preparation, practice before a mirror, a modicum of self-confidence, and some helpful feedback from a trusted friend or spouse.

The fear of speaking publicly may lead to procrastination in preparing the speech. A school librarian who has agreed to present the views of a group of concerned teachers about textbook censorship at the next school board meeting may fear that the controversial nature of the topic will generate opposition or rejection from some vocal parents attending the meeting. Fear of this anticipated (but by no means certain) reaction may cause the librarian to delay preparation of a thorough and well-argued presentation of the issues surrounding textbook censorship.

Even with thorough preparation and effective delivery, the librarian may be fearful that her message will not be received positively. Fear of criticism, ridicule, and rejection can lead to postponement. Positive reception, however, is never in the control of the person transmitting the message; only sending the message is under one’s control, and it is foolish to fear what cannot be controlled.
If criticism does occur, it probably comes from only one or a few persons. If they have a different opinion, remember that it is only an opinion, a subjective point of view. Their negative reception of your views may hurt your ego, but it cannot diminish your integrity as a person or the validity of your message.

Once a commitment is made to do any task, even one involving fear, the way out is through. That is, the way to success is doing the task to the best of one’s ability. Agonizing or worrying about how others will receive your work is a far greater deterrent to success than any factor over which you have no control. Remember the old saying: Luck is 90% diligent preparation and 10% fate.

Sources of Fear

Fears that delay action usually come from messages sent by a parent or other well-meaning authority figure implying that one’s efforts must measure up to some expected level of excellence (“Be the best coach in the state”). Or the message states or implies that one is somehow incapable (slow, dense, “klutzy,” etc.) of singing, dancing, doing math, or whatever.

The burden of having to be perfect, the best, as good as (whoever), or always having to succeed (win) paralyzes or severely constrains action, because the doer feels compelled to find just the “right” way to attain an imposed level of excellence or perfection. Rather than procrastinate out of fear that the result will not be good enough, the doer should realize that one need only do the best of what one is capable and not try to meet some standard of excellence imposed by others.

People are capable of accomplishing almost anything if they fully devote their minds and energies to it. Moreover, people are seldom asked to take on projects that they are incapable of doing or to perform at a level beyond their ability. Yet for some people, the strangling fear persists that someone will think they are not competent or sufficiently capable. The message, “I must do well in the eyes of others,” is one given to ourselves to win approval from other people.
All anyone needs to do is give “my best” in any given situation. People who want more than one’s best must be either convinced to modify their expectations or invited to impose their standards on someone else. Procrastination stemming from fear that one’s effort will not be good enough can be replaced by prompt and persistent effort, which in most instances will be received positively by mom, dad, mentor, or boss.

Sometimes fear of an administrator or other authority figure generates the self-message that the results will not meet standards of the person in charge. This is especially true when the authority’s standards are not clearly spelled out. In such cases, the doer must request that standards be clearly specified in advance. And, if indeed the level of achievement expected is beyond one’s capability, then one should either request assistance or ask to be relieved from the assignment. Either option is better than procrastination.

Messages received that one is “slow,” “clumsy,” “unmechanical,” “can’t sing,” etc., are often internalized as “That’s just the way I am” and serve as a convenient excuse for not trying or not embarking on activities that could lead to a desired goal. A vocal music teacher may claim she is “just not mechanical” or a skilled auto mechanics instructor may lament he is “just not musical.” In truth, both could learn to perform the other’s specialty at some level of competence if they had a strong desire and were willing to devote the time and effort needed to develop the skill. The music teacher might never tune engines quite as deftly as the auto mechanics instructor, and he might never be able to sing a musical phrase as sensitively as the music teacher; yet neither is solely a mechanic or a musician. Each became a specialist through persistent effort, but that persistence can be channelled into other areas. The determining factor is attitude rather than aptitude. Paderewski, the famous pianist, said, “Before I was a genius I was a drudge!”

In the same way, the fear that holds back an educator from learning computer programming because he or she is not “technically in-
clined” is irrational. What is the most terrible thing that can happen to a person if he puts forth his best effort to learn computer programming? At worst, the person may experience non-success. This would neither endanger life nor put one’s job in jeopardy. But if fear deters people from even making the effort, then they will never know whether they could have succeeded. In reality, if a person makes a conscientious effort and receives adequate instruction, he or she is likely to achieve partial success, at least a level that satisfies one’s own standards.

**Fear of Success**

Since most human beings strive to succeed, it seems paradoxical that there should be such a thing as fear of success. Yet many persons procrastinate precisely because of fears of success. Such fears take a variety of forms:

1. *I'll overshadow and thus hurt some person.* This fear is usually exhibited in connection with a loved one or someone for whom the person feels responsible. A brilliant chemistry teacher refused to seek admission to a doctoral program because her brother, who had been refused admission to several graduate schools, would be “hurt” if she achieved what he had been unable to accomplish. After some counseling she was able to see that her brother’s “hurt” was really a selfish attempt to salve his failure by discouraging her success. Success hurts no one unless it is achieved by exploiting others.

2. *I'll leave someone behind.* A fine adult education teacher who had the credentials to become a university professor avoided applying for an open position because it would mean moving to a nearby city, and he would be leaving behind two children living across town with his former wife. A female guidance counselor put off marriage because her invalid mother “needed” her and she did not want to leave her mother “alone.” In both these cases, the individuals avoided seizing an opportunity because of fear of leaving someone behind. The adult education teacher could have visited his children regularly even if he had accepted the university position. The commuting distance
was only about a half hour longer than it currently was. The guidance counselor after marriage would have had the financial resources to see that her mother was adequately cared for without sacrificing the right to a life of her own. Procrastinating did not bring peace or contentment to either of these persons.

3. *I'll make someone angry or resentful.* Like the preceding fears, this one involves avoiding success rather than dealing with the person who is resentful of your success. Malcontents resentful of the success of others are narrow persons who seek to constrict others rather than to expand themselves. No educator should restrict achievement or success because of such resentment or anger.

4. *If I succeed, I'll have to live up to it.* A neophyte teacher whose advanced students' achievement scores were far below what his principal considered appropriate finally admitted he avoided pushing his students because if they demonstrated outstanding performance once, he would be expected to produce those same results every year. The principal replied: “Good grief! Because Tom Watson once shot a 64 doesn't mean he is expected to repeat that score every time he steps on the golf course!” Succeeding once does not mean you have to perform at a peak level all the time. It proves you can succeed and in all likelihood will continue to do so. But it does not obligate you to maintain outstanding results; nor are you a failure if you excel only once. Success makes future achievements more likely, yet does not require a repeat performance!

5. *I am not entitled to success; I don't deserve it.* Persons harboring this self-message rarely believe they should be denied rewards, only that they should “try” and not succeed. Don't “try”, work at it in a committed and persistent manner. Accept the rewards of action rather than the consequences of delay.

6. *I will prevent someone else from succeeding if I am successful.* This fear is based on the erroneous logic that if I succeed there is less success available for others. Being as successful as I can be does not preclude equal or greater success by another person.
Fearing Costs More than Doing

Fear immobilizes us and leads to procrastination. Fear stems from self-messages that say:

1. I will not succeed.
2. If I succeed, there will be negative consequences.
3. I do not know what will happen, so it is safer not to act than to risk the unknown.

All achievement requires action and all action involves risk. Thus, the choice is to risk and act or to avoid and delay and not achieve. The three self-messages cited above can be changed to:

1. I will not succeed unless I act, and I can succeed with more careful planning and diligent effort. Greater penalties and mental pain result from not acting than from risking intelligently and enduring occasional negative results.
2. Success does not bring negative consequences. People or circumstances connected with success may produce negative by-products; but as long as success is worth the efforts expended to achieve it, I need not fear it.
3. Results of effort may be unpredictable, but the outcome of avoidance and delay is failure to achieve anything. Postponing offers no rewards. Achievement offers many rewards, even though it may involve temporary setbacks along the way.

Fear is one of the most difficult human emotions to manage. It is not necessary to overcome fear; one need only dissolve it. Eliminating procrastination is not winning a battle with fear; it is showing that the contest is unnecessary. Franklin Roosevelt put it well when he said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” The only things we should truly fear are the negative outcomes that result from doing nothing.
Overcoming Procrastination
By Increasing Self-Esteem

Many people think of themselves in terms of a public opinion poll: "Fifteen percent of me thinks I'm capable, 60% of me thinks I'm not capable, and 25% of me is undecided!" Given this self-perception, it is not surprising that people use only a fraction of their available ability. This disparity between perceived ability and actual ability is the cause of much delay and indecision. Our self-concept structures the projects we undertake and sends self-messages that determine our self-confidence. A self-concept that says "I'm not capable" puts a lid on accomplishment.

Self-concept consists of self-identity (who and what we believe we are), self-esteem (how capable or worthy we see ourselves), and self-aspiration (what we strive to achieve). While all three are closely linked, it is the lack of self-esteem that plays a central role in procrastinating behavior. The indecision that prevents us from undertaking a project stems from the gnawing feeling that we may not be capable or competent enough to succeed.

Self-esteem is formed very early in life, based on the feedback of others, especially our parents. As young children we are dependent on others not only for our physical well-being but also for messages about our adequacy as achievers, our "OK-ness." Unfortunately, many of the messages young children receive deal with what they do wrong rather than what they do well. The positive messages children do receive tend to be tied to performance ("You did a good job of picking..."
up your toys today”). But the negative messages usually are directed at the person (“You’re a bad girl,” or “How could you be so dumb?”).

Children are keen listeners and observers, yet are inexperienced and often have faulty interpretations of what they hear or observe. To them, negative messages are translated as “I am not worthy. I am not capable.” Soon they begin to believe that they are worthwhile, good, or OK only when they do things right or well. When negative messages are far more prevalent than positive ones, they look to others for assessment of their capability; and this persists into adult life. Doubting their capability, they seek the counsel of others rather than listening to themselves. When doubt persists, people hesitate to pursue a desired goal. Thus, they procrastinate — withholding commitment to a task or postponing action.

It has been said that the “wedge of doubt” is the most powerful weapon available for destroying self-esteem. Doubt lowers self-esteem, which in turn thwarts achievement. Yet achievement is necessary for increasing self-esteem. The only way out of this dilemma is for the self to do the “esteeming.” Make it truly self-esteem, not other-esteem. The difficulty stems from how extremely fragile self-esteem is for most of us.

Achievement requires trying new and unmastered tasks, which usually entails making some mistakes or errors. If we are not comfortable with ourselves, these mistakes can bring self-rebuke, “beating on ourselves,” and feelings of being incapable. Then when another challenging task comes along, the pain of past self-rebuke as well as criticism from others causes a “DELAY” message to register in the mind.

The way out of this quagmire is to accept the inevitability of some errors and to use them as means of correcting or doing things differently the next time. When criticism comes from others, divide it into opinion and useful information, then discard the opinion and use the information for growth and improvement. Intelligent creatures take what is nourishing from the environment and discard the toxic and
harmful. Even a monkey will eat the banana and throw away the peel. Surely we can be as sensible as a monkey!

The point here is not to condone errors or to ignore constructive criticism, but rather to protect self-esteem by neutralizing self-rebuke and the sting of critical comments by others. Since what we do (or don’t do) is largely a result of how we think, it is necessary to give ourselves only two kinds of messages: 1) warm acknowledgment of our successes and 2) use mistakes and constructive criticism to improve and grow.

Six Methods of Increasing Self-Esteem

1. Acknowledge past successes and accomplishments. Do not dwell on mistakes or times you have “blown it.” Think of mistakes only in terms of what can be done differently in the future. Keep in one place all awards, notes of appreciation, certificates, diplomas and trophies. Affirming accomplishments affirms self-worth.

2. Affirm your own worth as a human being with many abilities and unique qualities. Remember the bumper sticker message: “God doesn’t make junk!” It is not necessary to be famous, wealthy, or highly talented to have worth as a person. It is only necessary to know you can contribute to society by making a sincere effort. What builds self-esteem is a willingness to make the effort, not achieving to someone else’s expectations.

3. Seek ways to grow and learn new skills or knowledge. We live in a society with exploding opportunities to learn. Learning new things is one of the easiest and best ways of building self-esteem.

4. Associate with positive or supportive people. Avoid those who are negative, pessimistic, or bitter. Post a sign on your office door: No dumping on me. Go dump on somebody else.” Look for mentors who are positive role models and supportive of your efforts. Tell them your goals and ask for their support. Positive feedback increases self-esteem.

5. Set challenging but realistic goals. Write them down. Even if all your goals are not fully achieved, give them your “best shot.” Well-
planned goals increase achievement, and achievement builds self-esteem.

6. Accept that mistakes and setbacks will occur, yet use the information gained as a building block rather than letting them divert commitment to a task or undermine your confidence.

Procrastination occurs when we begin to have doubts about our capability. When confronted with a task, we face the compelling question: “Can I do it?” No one can answer this question unless he or she makes the effort to try. History is full of stories of people achieving things they did not think they were capable of doing. No success is attained without risk. And unless the risk is life threatening, the worst that can happen is a damaged ego or bruised pride. No one has ever been known to die from either of these.
Conclusion

Eliminating procrastination is entirely a do-it-yourself project. Procrastination is not some mysterious force that overtakes our being. It is us deluding ourselves. It is refusing to accept that the only way to be rid of some tasks is to do them. To eliminate procrastination: 1) admit it is a problem; 2) identify the cause and address it; 3) do the unpleasant or difficult task first; 4) dissolve fear by realizing how unproductive it can be and then do what is feared; 5) erase doubt by focusing on success, which builds self-esteem. Educators who fall behind in their work are behind in success. Successful educators do the things unsuccessful educators postpone or avoid.
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