

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

STOP PROCRASTINATING

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It seems that no one is immune to the tendency to procrastinate. When someone asked Ernest Hemingway how to write a novel, his response was "First you defrost the refrigerator." But putting off tasks takes a big hit on our productivity, and psyche. Procrastination is not inevitable. Figuring out why you postpone work and then taking concrete steps to prevent it will help you get more done and feel good about yourself.

What the Experts Say

According to Ned Hallowell, a psychiatrist and the author of 12 books, including *Driven to Distraction*, delaying work is often a symptom of how busy you are. "We procrastinate because we all have too much to do," he says. And of course, we want to dodge things we don't like. "Many people procrastinate because they fear the drudgery or the difficulty of the task they are avoiding," says Teresa Amabile, the Edsel Bryant Ford Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and coauthor of *The Progress Principle*. But, as you have likely learned, it doesn't pay to dawdle. "Putting it off doesn't make it go away. Getting it done does," says Hallowell. Here are five principles to follow next time you find yourself deferring important work.

1. Figure out what's holding you back

When you find yourself ignoring or delaying a task, ask yourself why. Hallowell points out that there are two types of tasks most often deferred:

- Something you don't like to do. This is the most common one. As Hallowell says, "You don't put off eating your favorite dessert."
- Something you don't know how to do. When you lack the necessary knowledge or are unsure of how to start a job, you are more likely to avoid it.

Once you've identified why you've put something off, you can break the cycle and prevent future bouts of procrastination.

2. Set deadlines for yourself

One of the simplest things you can do is create a schedule with clear due dates for each part of a task. "As soon as you get the project, chunk it down into a few manageable segments that you can complete in sequence," Amabile advises. Then, assign deadlines for each piece. "Put an appointment in your calendar to work on a small piece of the next segment each day to allow yourself to get it done a bit at a time," she says. These "small wins" make the work more

manageable and contribute to your sense of progress. And achieving them is much easier than trying to barrel through a complex project.

Setting deadlines also makes sure the project doesn't get buried. For things that you are likely to put off, add reminders in your calendar or put a Post-It on your computer screen. Use whatever visual cues will ensure you don't avoid the project.

3. Increase the rewards

We often dally because the reward for doing a certain assignment is too far off. Regina Conti, an associate professor of psychology at Colgate University and an expert in motivation, provides the example of doing your taxes. "A person may want to complete their taxes to avoid the legal penalties of not doing so, but because those penalties are far in the future and the task is a boring one, they will not have much incentive to get started with the project," she says. To make a task feel more immediate, focus on short-term rewards, such as getting a refund. Or if there aren't any, insert your own. Treat yourself to a coffee break, or a quick chat with a co-worker once you've finished a task. You can also embed the reward into the task itself by making it more fun to do. Work with someone on a particularly difficult project or set up a game for yourself so that doing the task isn't so boring or onerous.

4. Involve others

One of the principles Hallowell often repeats in his work is "Never worry alone." If you don't know how to do something, ask for help. Turn to a trusted colleague or a friend for advice. Or, look for an example of the project you are working on to use as a starting point. "Others are a great source of extrinsic motivation," says Conti. Asking someone to review your work can spur you to get started knowing they will expect it. You can even enter an anti-procrastination pact with a co-worker: share what you are working on and hold each other accountable to set deadlines.

5. Get in the habit

"People throw up a hand and say 'I'm such a procrastinator' as if they have no control," says Hallowell. "You do have control over this and you'll be very proud when you change it." Hallowell says that he used to be a procrastinator but trained himself to stop. "I don't procrastinate at all now. I just do it," he says. There are immediate benefits when you start getting things done right away, and

it's a habit you can cultivate. Amabile suggests tracking your improvement. "Spend just five minutes a day to note the progress you made, any setbacks you encountered, and what you might do the next day to enable further progress," she says. She recommends you do this in a work diary. Then see yourself, and talk about yourself with others, as someone who gets things done. "The most powerful event, for maintaining positive inner work life, is making progress in meaningful work," says Amabile.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Identify which tasks you are most likely to put off
- Use deadlines to motivate you to get things done within a certain timeframe
- Reward yourself for reaching milestones

Don't:

- Call yourself a procrastinator as if it is an intrinsic part of who you are
- Tackle arduous tasks on your own — ask others to help you get over the hump
- Try to finish a project in one sitting — break it down into smaller, achievable chunks

Case study #1: Know why

Lisa Freitag, a marketing consultant for an online company based in Silicon Valley, noticed she was putting off planning on a major marketing event. Every time she thought about what needed to be done, she got overwhelmed and decided to work on something else. This was odd for her: she was used to taking on big projects and blazing through them, regardless of their complexity. This project was different in that it involved several other people, including many top executives. "I procrastinate when I have to rely on other people. I prefer to just take something and run with it," she says. For this event, she was worried about depending on others, especially busy leaders with many competing commitments.

Lisa's anxiety wasn't helping her and she needed to get the project going. "I wrote down a list of everything that had to happen, mapped it out on a calendar and then backed out to figure out what I needed to do first," she says. Since many of the tasks required input from others, she wrote down what she needed from each person by when. This helped her to make clear requests to everyone involved. "I realized I was playing a very important role in keeping people on track and the executives involved appreciate that that's what I was doing," she says. The project still caused Lisa stress but she got through it. "I made a deal with myself. Each day, I told myself I'm going to work on it for 20 minutes now and then 20 minutes in the afternoon," she says. Once she put a little time into it, she found it got easier with each day. Lisa also set a long-term reward for herself: when the project is complete she's planning a team dinner.

Case study #2: Keep it top of mind

Janet Benton was an executive assistant at a medical device company when her boss assigned her an important but lower-priority project she was having trouble completing. Soon, Janet realized she too was putting it off. She couldn't find the time to even start the project with all of the other pressing tasks on her plate. But since she had no one to delegate the project to, she decided to make progress on it in small increments. "The trick is to recognize there are steps that can be taken even if you can't get to the final destination on the same day," she says. She broke the project down into separate tasks that she could accomplish in 15 minutes. Using Outlook, she then scheduled time twice a day — once in the morning and then again after lunch — to take on two of the tasks. "If you give yourself an Outlook reminder and it keeps popping up you're more likely to deal with it," she says. Before she left each day, she wrote down the two things she was going to do the following day.

She also kept herself accountable. "The final fail-safe was to secretly vow that two days could not pass without some kind of progress," By doing that, she was able to gain momentum on the project and it became part of her daily priorities. "That overlooked project was soon completed and turned back over to a very grateful boss. And it was off my desk, which made me happy as well," she says.

Janet also developed other coping mechanisms to make sure projects that she might put off stay in her physical line of sight. "I always put that pesky project in an off-color folder, and put it under my to-do list at the day's end, on top of my

keyboard or computer." That way when she comes in the next day, she has a reminder that she can't let it go.
