

We have all procrastinated at some point. You may tell yourself things like “There’s so many other things I’d rather be doing!” and “There’s plenty of time, I’ll get to that later”, or “I work better under pressure, so I don’t need to do it straight away!”

However, procrastination can become chronic and habitual. You are constantly putting things off until there is a cumulative effect. The more you must do, or the more you don’t like what you must do, the more you procrastinate. Procrastination becomes a vicious cycle: you become overwhelmed with what must be done and the lack of time left to do it, become increasingly stressed, and feel completely stuck and unable to move forward.

Lack of motivation is part of procrastination. You are in avoidance mode, rather than drive mode! Motivation is what drives you to achieve what needs to be done. Determining what motivates you can help you overcome procrastination.

What causes procrastination?

Not confronting your fears. You may fear failure, rejection, or not doing your best work and being poorly judged by others. You may fear that you don’t have the skills and knowledge to complete the task. You may distract yourself with something pleasant to avoid thinking about your fear and working towards a solution.

Avoiding discomfort. You may avoid feeling the discomfort of a difficult task, thinking that others don’t feel this way so you must be lacking in some way. This is not true – successful people often feel discomfort, they just know how to work through this discomfort, accepting it and taking action anyway in line with their values and goals.

Emotional state. You may feel tired, hungry, or stressed and use these as reasons to not get started. You may get started and begin to feel overwhelmed if you haven’t planned what you need to do well. You may think “I will wait until I’m in the mood.” Often with tasks that are boring or difficult, you will never be in the mood. Just accept you won’t feel great but need to take action anyway.

Action illusion. You may be doing lots of activity, but not really progressing. You may be planning

and re-planning furiously, but making no real progress. You may be prioritising other things, and telling yourself “This is more important right now” when in fact you are avoiding a higher priority task. The real reasons for procrastination can be hidden by an illusion of activity.

Lack of motivation. Motivation is either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is an internal drive for personal satisfaction, enjoyment and benefit. Undertaking tasks that are in line with your values often provides intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is an external drive, to provide benefit to others, gain a material possession or gain an aspiration such as a job promotion. Undertaking tasks that are in line with your goals often gives extrinsic motivation. If you don’t know how you will benefit from the task at hand then you can be unmotivated to achieve it.

Overcome procrastination and lack of motivation

Acknowledge unhelpful thoughts and feelings. Notice the thoughts and feelings you are having that are contributing to your fear and discomfort. Don’t struggle with them or try to stop them. This is how your mind and body works when confronted with stressors and concerns – it generates negative thoughts and feelings! Accept these thoughts and feelings and focus on positive self-talk and action. Change your focus of attention away from your thoughts and feelings and to your values and goals. Take action in line with these.

Identify your values and set goals. What is really important to you? What gives your life purpose? What are you aspiring to achieve? What is your long-term goal of the task at hand, what is your goal for this week, today, the next hour? Are your goals specific, realistic, and achievable? Visualise success: see yourself starting, getting through and finishing, see yourself achieving your goals.

Plan. How you will achieve the actions required to meet your goals? Prioritise tasks and break them up into smaller parts. Plan your study time in “shifts” of time, from 15 minutes to two hours, with good rest breaks in between. Start and finish your shifts on time to increase your motivation to start the next shift! Every shift, no matter how small, gets

you closer to your goal! If you're struggling to start a shift "strive for five!" – commit to five minutes of work then reassess.

Identify what motivates you. What will motivate you to start, keep going, and finish this task? Is it something intrinsic or extrinsic? Identify a motivator for each of your goals and keep that in mind as you approach each task! If you are struggling with motivation it might be time to review your values and goals and identify how what you are trying to do aligns with them.

Commit yourself. Tell others about your goals and plan. Public commitment can increase motivation, however don't get caught in the "action illusion" as discussed earlier. Talking about your goals and plan does not equal progress!

Reward yourself. Reward yourself with well-earned breaks, a treat or something special, particularly if you are a habitual procrastinator and are now breaking the habit! Be kind to yourself and tell yourself "I'm doing great!", "This isn't easy but I'm getting there", "I am focused on what I need to do to achieve my goals".

Lower your expectations. If you don't have the knowledge, skills, or time to do the task perfectly then be honest with yourself about that. Work out

what is realistic with the resources you have available and set goals and plan accordingly. Sometimes being perfect or even close to perfect is just not achievable, and that's the way life is. Don't worry what others will think, focus on what you can control which is being realistic, honest and kind to yourself.

Stay healthy. Eat well, sleep well, and exercise. Good health and energy are vital for motivation! Keep healthy snacks on hand, exercise increases endorphins and decreases stress hormones, and see your doctor if you're struggling to sleep well or feeling lethargic, there could be an underlying issue.

Just do it. In spite of your thoughts and feelings, take action! Keep at it, tell yourself how well you are doing, and it will be done. "It always seems impossible, until it is done." – Nelson Mandela.

If procrastination and lack of motivation are causing you distress, or you are falling further and further behind in study, work or what needs to be done at home, help is available. Contact JCU Student Equity and Wellbeing, or see your GP or doctor, or other mental health professional. Support is available 24 hours a day from Lifeline (Phone 13 11 14).

Further information and support

- More motivated in minutes: 5 science-backed tricks to get you going <https://buffer.com/resources/increase-your-motivation-tips/>
- Lifehack 'Productivity' articles <http://www.lifehack.org/productivity?ref=header-menu-productivity>
- Simple guidelines to help you overcome procrastination <http://blog.iqmatrix.com/overcome-procrastination>

Student Equity and Wellbeing

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