

Breaking the Cycle of Chronic Procrastination

Objective

To accomplish a task you have been putting off by applying techniques to overcome your procrastination.

You Should Know

Many people create problems for themselves because they are always putting off important tasks. Procrastination can cause problems at work when responsibilities are put off until the last minute, or financial stress when bills are paid late. If you constantly delay tasks, the resulting urgency might create stress and anxiety that impacts you – as well as everyone around you.

Distractibility, disorganization, overwhelm, and lack of prioritizing can make breaking the cycle of chronic procrastination difficult. However, there are ways to break this habit. The following are practical solutions to help you stop procrastinating.

1. Identify *why* you procrastinate. If you frequently procrastinate, ask yourself, “Why am I procrastinating?” If you clearly identify why you are procrastinating, you are more likely to come up with solutions to successfully complete tasks. These are common reasons why adults with ADHD procrastinate:

- The task is large, complex, or overwhelming.
- The task is tedious or boring.
- Not knowing *how* to do the task makes it difficult to get started.
- Motivation only arises when there is a sense of urgency and a deadline is near.
- Negative thoughts and unpleasant feelings get in the way.
- Multiple distractions take you off-track.
- It is too challenging to organize and prioritize the steps involved to complete the task.

2. Create a manageable “to-do” list. If your list is too long it will contribute to procrastination as you are unsure which task to tackle next. Each day commit to accomplishing just two tasks. If you frequently deal with urgent or unplanned disruptions, identify how you can minimize or eliminate them. If possible, delegate some tasks because you do not have to do everything yourself.

3. Break a large task into small steps. If a large or complex task causes you to feel stuck or overwhelmed, break it down into smaller, doable parts. When you break a task down into small steps you can work more efficiently and productively. Visualizing the actual steps required might be difficult, and you might not understand how all the pieces fit together. Ask someone to help you think through and organize the steps. Avoid the trap of becoming so focused on the details you fail to make progress! Planning becomes a way to procrastinate.

4. Set deadlines. When you have broken the task down into small parts, create deadlines for completing each step to avoid last-minute panic as a deadline approaches. It is less

overwhelming and easier to remain motivated when you have small, short-term goals. Each time you complete a short-term goal, reward yourself.

5. **Use positive social pressure.** Ask someone to be your accountability partner, and let them know your goals and deadlines. This person can provide the motivation to start a project and keep you moving in a positive direction.

6. **Make dull tasks appealing.** A boring or tedious task might not be stimulating enough to propel you into action. If this is the reason you procrastinate, ask yourself, “How can I make this more interesting?” You could turn it into a competition with yourself. For example, set a timer and see how many dishes you can wash in ten minutes. Make the task fun by playing music.

7. **Switch off between tasks.** Rotating between two tasks can keep your interest levels high and allow you to feel focused and motivated on both tasks. Set a timer and spend equal time on each task.

8. **Make a small commitment of time.** It is much easier to begin a task if you are only doing it for 10 minutes. Set your timer, work for 10 minutes, then review how you feel. Set your timer for another 10 minutes, and continue working in small chunks of time.

9. **Limit distractions.** Turn off your cell phone, email and social media notifications, and anything else that distracts you.

10. **Watch for internal distractions that can have an effect on your ability to concentrate.** You might say to yourself, “I’ll do this thing first, and then get to the important task.” However, it is often other “little things” that contribute to the cycle of procrastination. You might appear to be busy, yet you are avoiding the task that must get done.

11. **Replace negative thoughts with positive ones.** Your thoughts and feelings are powerful, so engage in self-talk that is positive, gentle, and kind. Being supportive to yourself will make it more likely you will take action. In contrast, when you are negative, it can be hard to break the habit of procrastination.

What to Do

1. Choose a task you have been putting off:

Who can help you or motivate you? _____

2. Sometimes just figuring out where or how to start is the challenge. Problems with organization might cause you to struggle with planning, prioritizing, and sequencing the parts that need to be done to get started, stay on track, and complete the task.

First, write down the parts you need to complete the task you identified above. Then, prioritize the list.

Small Step	Deadline	Priority
a) _____	_____	_____
b) _____	_____	_____
c) _____	_____	_____
d) _____	_____	_____
e) _____	_____	_____
f) _____	_____	_____
g) _____	_____	_____
h) _____	_____	_____

Use a separate piece of paper if you need more space.

3. Once you get started, you may find you quickly become sidetracked by something more interesting. It can be difficult to regulate your attention. To remain focused, do the following to minimize distractions. Check off the ones that you are willing to try:

____ Shut off phone and computer notifications.

____ Use reminders to keep you on task – for example, small notes or a large white board.

____ Frequently ask yourself, “What should I be doing now?” Cue yourself with a repeating alarm that forces a small break so you notice what you are doing. Make a conscious choice as to whether it is the best use of your time.

____ Work in a quieter and less visually-stimulating place or use a white noise machine or fan. Use noise canceling headphones or foam ear plugs.

____ Keep an orderly work space, but if your work space is currently messy, clear it to the side and schedule time to organize it.

____ When you find yourself getting distracted, go back to the original task and finish it before moving on to the next task.

____ Break work sessions into smaller pieces with short breaks in between to reduce wandering attention. Set an alarm to cue you to return so the breaks do not become longer than the work sessions.

____ Work with a partner or group.

____ Set aside specific, interruption-free periods of your day for tasks that require extra focus. If necessary, explain to coworkers or family members that you should only be interrupted in an emergency.

____ If ideas pop up, take a moment to write them down to return to them later.

4. Once your attention is focused, you may find it is hard to stay alert, motivated, and on-track when you lack interest or feel under-stimulated.

What can you do to remain motivated, alert, and on-track? Describe.

5. You may experience overwhelm, anxiety, or pressure, halting your forward progress. As much as you know you need to complete the task, you just cannot get moving.

What aspects of the small step or task cause overwhelm, anxiety, or pressure? Describe.

What can you do to reward yourself for completing each small step?

Referring to the previous techniques and suggestions, what can you do to reduce the feelings that are creating obstacles for continued progress? Other than reward yourself, list at least three things you can do.

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

6. If you have trouble estimating the time it takes to complete the task, you might put off the small steps required to complete it. You might believe you have plenty of time to get it done. An impaired sense of time leads to deadlines sneaking up on you.

What can you do to develop a better sense of time? Ideas include setting timers, alarms, or using a phone app.

7. If you have experienced repeated frustration when attempting to complete tasks, you might delay certain steps to avoid frustration and other unpleasant feelings. You might fear imperfection or failure.

Is the fear of failure or wish for perfection contributing to your procrastination? Are there other unpleasant feelings you want to avoid? Explain.

Now, for two weeks use the following chart to plan the small steps you can take to complete the task you identified above. Note the technique you used to complete the step, whether or not the step was completed, and any obstacles you encountered. Then describe what you could do differently.

Which techniques were most helpful in reducing your tendency to procrastinate?

Did you complete the task identified in step 1? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did this exercise reduce your habit of procrastination? Explain.

Did this exercise allow you to identify strategies that actually work for you? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

Is there anything in particular you learned from this exercise?
