



Positively Legal: How to Beat Procrastination

Skills and Professional Development



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Tips for overcoming procrastination

As we come to the end of the year, so many of us find ourselves more frazzled and overworked than expected. Many of the goals we set for ourselves in the early part of the year remain unfulfilled and really, not even started. We have so much to do, yet we don't seem to be getting through it. In my [February 2023 column](#), I went on a journey to find inspiration on how to reduce the long list of goals I had created in January, to a shorter list of meaningful goals and habits I could build into my daily life.

Author and columnist Oliver Burkeman has worked out that if you live to 80, you have about 4,000 weeks on earth. His book, "[Four Thousand Weeks](#)," sets out to identify (with quite a bit of humor) how best to use the limited time we have which I considered in my earlier column. I looked into prioritizing for meaning and using the Eisenhower matrix for refining granular tasks.

But the issue doesn't seem to be my goals or to-do list, it isn't that I can't work out how to start; I seem to be stuck. Procrastinating has become an art. I want to get some tasks and goals done before the end of the year and went looking for some different ideas to help beat procrastination.

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Why do we procrastinate?

Professor Andrew Huberman, on his podcast, describes procrastination as [a way to deliberately avoid tasks that need doing](#). Both Ali Abdaal in his book “[Feel Good Productivity](#)” and Ellen Hendriksen (author of “How to Be Enough: Self-Acceptance for Self-Critics and Perfectionists” and “How to Be Yourself: Quiet Your Inner Critic and Rise Above Social Anxiety”) in an article for [Psychology Today](#) describe procrastination as “less about avoiding a task than avoiding the negative emotions associated with that task.” When negative feelings like “confusion, fear, and inertia stand in our way, we put things off. This leads to even more bad feelings, and in turn even more procrastination. It’s a negative loop of low mood and stagnation.”

Hendriksen continues that procrastination is not being lazy, it is rooted in “perfectionism, anxiety, or fear of failure.” Procrastination allows us to avoid feeling bored, incompetent, or stressed so we keep doing it.



Negative feelings can lead to a loop of procrastination and low mood. Bits And Splits / Shutterstock.com

According to Abdaal, uncertainty makes us feel bad so we achieve less. However, some people deal with uncertainty better than others, something known as the “intolerance of uncertainty inventory” (IUI) which was developed by Michel Dugas and his colleagues in the 1990s, and sets out a series of statements that express tolerance of uncertainty (e.g., “Not knowing what will happen in advance is often unacceptable for me”). Responding to these shows your level of tolerance to uncertainty.

Abdaal described people with a low tolerance of uncertainty as tending to view uncertain situations as threatening and anxiety-provoking, leading them to putting things off — particularly tasks involving any ambiguity. He says that we then create a reinforcement loop by:

- Overestimating what's at stake;
- Becoming hypervigilant as we sense danger;
- Being hypervigilant to threats, we can't calm down when there really is no danger; and
- We become avoidant as we want to get out as soon as possible from the perceived threat.

What are ways we can break the cycle of procrastination?

Setting NICE goals

Abdaal suggests that uncertainty drives procrastination by creating ambiguity over our ultimate purpose: “If we don't know why we are embarking on any given project, it's near impossible to get on with actually doing it.”

The first step is to understand why you are doing something. The next step is finding an action plan which requires goal setting. Previous articles have discussed SMART goals and goal setting including and [how goal setting can help us achieve more while improving our health and happiness](#).

Abdaal suggests that the tunnel vision we get from being overly focused on a specific end goal can move us away from the pleasure we may achieve from a task (i.e., our motivation).

He suggests creating NICE goals:

- **Near-term.** Near-term goals ensure that we're concentrating on the immediate steps we need to take along our journey so we don't get overwhelmed by the bigger picture. He suggests daily or weekly objectives as the most helpful time horizon.
- **Input-based.** Input-based goals emphasize the process, rather than some distant, abstract end-goal. An output-based goal focuses on the end-result — “Lose five kg by the end of the year.” Whereas, an input-based goal focuses on what we can do in the here and now — “Go for a 10-minute walk every day.”
- **Controllable.** Focus on goals that are within our control. “Spend eight hours a day on my novel,” is not within our control as there may be external factors stopping us. However, allocating 20 minutes per day to the task is far more realistic.
- **Energizing.** Find ways to integrate play, power, and people into the goals themselves.

He then described different levels of time blocking to help as the most underrated way to get something done.

- **Level 1 is to time-block specific tasks you've been avoiding:**
 - Start addressing those tasks that have been sitting on your to-do list for far too long.
 - For example, cleaning out your inbox, decluttering your workspace, or finally getting around to the report you've been avoiding; and
 - Allocating a specific chunk of time to those tasks in your calendar (e.g., 9 am to 10 am on Tuesday for clearing your email inbox).
- **Level 2 is time-blocking most of your day:**
 - Start your morning by creating a time-block schedule for the entire day (e.g., 7 am to 8 am is for exercise, 9 am to 11 am is for intense work on your most important project; 11 am to 11:30 am is for emails).
 - This is essentially turning your to-do list into a schedule; and
 - By allocating time slots for each task, you're creating a clear plan for when and how your day's work will be done.
- **Level 3 is time-blocking your ideal week:**
 - Include all aspects of your life (e.g., every weekend from 6 pm to 7 pm is dedicated to exercise, 7 pm to 8 pm for family dinner time, 8 pm to 9 pm for personal reading).
 - In this example, whole mornings on certain days (e.g., Tuesdays and Thursdays) might be blocked out for deep work.

Making dopamine work for you

Huberman says that when we procrastinate, we engage in activities that replace what we are supposed to do to give us a sense of accomplishment.

Huberman suggests starting with a healthy baseline dopamine level to try and combat procrastination. He suggests:

- Getting enough sleep as this restores baseline dopamine levels;
- Engaging in non-sleep deep rest as a way to help the body relax;
- Eat a well-balanced diet as part of healthy dopamine production;
- Get morning sunlight to increase cortisol early in the day and boost dopamine and mood;
- Exercise to help elevate baseline levels of dopamine; and
- Cultivate a growth mindset so we think we can improve even if we can't do something well "yet."

Huberman suggests that, if the baseline dopamine activities have all been met and you still lack motivation (or are procrastinating) try these activities to help increase dopamine as they can achieve a burst of pain or discomfort to trigger the dopamine peak:

- Deliberate cold exposure (this can increase levels of dopamine up to 4-5 hours);
- Meditation (even 5-10 mins can challenge some people enough to increase dopamine); and
- Quick and intense workouts (e.g., a cardio burst or heavy weights).

While these differ for everyone, they can help increase dopamine and find motivation to start getting some tasks done as we will be motivated to pursue the goal we set.

My [earlier article](#) discussed in more detail both meditation and non-sleep deep rest.

Changing out mindset

Hendriksen suggests six tips to try:

- **Change “I have to” to “I want to.”** Stop saying “I have to do this” and start thinking “I want to do this,” as this will change the goal to a challenge we can overcome. For example, she suggests changing our language from “I have to make those slides for my boss’ upcoming presentation,” to “If I ace these slides, I’m one step closer to that promotion.”
- **Aim for greatness, not perfection.** Perfectionists focus on avoiding failure by adopting an all or nothing mindset. She suggests that “perfectionism often comes from conflating performance and self-worth.” She suggests, “If you must evaluate yourself, approach your performance not as black or white, but as a continuum. Rather than 100 percent or 0 percent with nothing in between, take a balanced perspective. Evaluate using all percentage points from 0 to 100, not only the extremes. Think about how a teacher grades a paper — one misspelled word doesn’t sink the whole ship. Rather, there are weightages placed on spelling, grammar, creativity, and flow, and a quality paper is not limited to one domain. Similarly, when evaluating yourself or your performance, take a wider perspective to avoid the all-or-nothing trap.” She then suggests broadening your view of yourself to be more than your skills or performance.
- **Change your mood by diving in, not by stepping away.** When we think the short-term cleaning or checking social media will improve our mood, we should remember that “procrastination is a fake, fleeting boost.” Then improve your mood by starting with a small task to get you in the mood. This will help you feel positive and satisfied.
- **Don’t shoot yourself in the foot to make yourself feel better.** Don’t wait until the last minute to do things as this means you will not have enough time to do it well and you can then excuse yourself by blaming something outside of our control.
- **Use technology to fight technology.** Use apps like Freedom or RescueTime to keep yourself off Instagram and on task. She even suggests setting an alarm for 25 minutes of

work and then a five-minute break to refocus.

- **Rethink procrastination.** Identify what type of procrastinator you are: “Passive procrastinators match our traditional understanding of procrastination: they are paralyzed by indecision, can’t get started, and cope poorly. Active procrastinators, however, make a deliberate decision to put off doing work until the last minute to maximize motivation or performance. If you procrastinate because you do your best work under pressure, you’re an active procrastinator.”

Aim for greatness, not perfection.

Find something to break the cycle

Whichever method you find, it is important to start with some way to break the cycle of procrastination. Most of us need something to break the cycle as there can’t be many people who can easily follow Oliver Burkeman’s advice from his new book, [“Meditations for Mortals.”](#) “Almost no one wants to hear the answer to the question of how to spend most of your finite time doing things that matter to you, which involves no system. The answer is: you just do them. You pick something you genuinely care about, and then, for at least a few minutes — a quarter of an hour say — you do some of it. Today.”

While we all want to spend our finite time well, some of us need some tips and tools to help us along the way, especially if we want to tick off a few goals and items we have on our New Years’ resolutions lists before the end of the year.

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