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3 Ways to Eliminate Procrastination for Good



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Are you putting off reading this article? Did you already tell yourself you'll read it later?

Do you handle a lot of things this way? Perhaps you've missed a lot of opportunities waiting for "later" to come around. You may even think you're a hopeless case by now. You're not.

You might not even realize you procrastinate. You think to yourself, "I'm too busy getting stuff done to be a procrastinator. I've got a full plate and a hectic schedule." But is "getting stuff done" the best measure of whether you procrastinate?

Check out the two scenarios below.

Scenario 1: You sit on the couch in front of the television for two or three hours every night after work. You tell yourself, "I worked really hard today. I'm taking a well-deserved break." But you know you should have taken out the garbage yesterday, and tomorrow you have a work-related report or school paper due, which you've known about for three weeks. At work you haven't had a promotion in ten years, and at school, you've convinced yourself you're satisfied to be a C-average student.

Scenario 2: All week you're running. You run to work, to the store, take the kids to their sports, music, and dance practices, volunteer at the school cupcake sale, coach the soccer team, help the neighbors with their garage sale, run back to the store because you forgot some things, cook dinner, clean the house, and do the laundry. Your to-do list is getting longer and longer with less and less time at your disposal. Oddly, you have a feeling something big is missing from your life. Somehow, you never get to do for yourself what you *really* want.

The first scenario is a classic case of procrastination. Would you have thought the second one is procrastination, too?

The curse of constant activity

The first scenario is pretty obvious – it's the classic procrastination mode: We keep putting off what needs to be done in the hopes it will be easier later (it won't) or in the belief that we do our best work under pressure at the last minute (we don't).

The second scenario is a bit trickier. So often we fool ourselves that activity equals progress. If we're running so much, we must be getting something done, right? Of course we are.

But are we getting the *right* things done?

We run to do things either we, our family, or society has deemed must be done. While we can convince ourselves this activity is vital, for many of us the busyness is simply a way to avoid facing tough decisions, having difficult conversations, or engaging in deep reflection.

Before long, we're in a routine driven by reflex, bad assumptions, guilty feelings, and our own inability to say "no." It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to determine the truly important, life-changing activities we need to be focusing on if every little thing gets our attention.

The end result of too much of the wrong activity is we don't get to live our dreams – and we may not even know what they are. Sounds like a serious case of procrastination.

Ask yourself...

Take this quick assessment as your first step in dealing with procrastination. Do you say to yourself:

- I've got a lot of time; it can wait.
- I haven't done what I *really* want to do.
- I never finish everything on my to-do list.
- I can't get off the couch.
- The conditions aren't right yet for me to start working.

Do you see yourself in that list? Do you fit into one of the two scenarios above? Let's look at some basic questions that may reflect the daily activities of your life.

- Do you take 30-minute television breaks that often turn into several hours?
- Do you feel guilty when you say "no" to requests for your time?
- Do you find yourself rushing to get things done at the last minute because you put them off for so long?
- Do you do the easiest things on your to-do list first and put off difficult or unpleasant tasks?
- Do you have too much of the wrong things on your plate?
- Are you so focused on the people in your life that you don't take care of or focus on yourself?

As you now know, all of these questions apply to both scenarios described above.

Why we procrastinate

Procrastination is a complex issue, far more so than most of us realize. It's not simply delaying our dreams by putting things off or being too busy with the wrong things. Personality, biology, life experiences, and other underlying factors drive our particular kind of procrastination.

Procrastination is first and foremost a psychological issue that, according to researchers, most frequently is developed as our response to an authoritarian parenting style. Under that kind of influence, we create an exceedingly strong connection between our performance and our self-worth.

You could imagine how much fear is involved when every performance has a bearing on our self-worth. Fear – of inadequacy, of being rejected, of being unworthy of love – is the driving force, making it difficult for us to start tasks, stay focused, or complete them. Making mistakes is traumatic, and criticism can be shattering. For us procrastinators, taking action means enormous risk and a certain amount of pain, which, as a rule, people do their best to avoid.

Four reasons for procrastination

Researchers have identified four primary reasons for procrastination:

1. Low confidence that the project is going to succeed.

"Success" is a difficult concept for us procrastinators to get our heads around. We don't view success as others might. Our focus isn't on task accomplishment or reaping the visible rewards of success.

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"perfect" we can be
worthy.

Our ultimate goal is to be validated as a human being, to get a psychological pat on the head from someone whose attention we crave. The perfectionist variety of procrastination, in particular, is a stark example. We think by being "perfect" we can be worthy.

Over time, we figure out that the likelihood of getting the kind of satisfaction we want is slim; our path proves to be bumpy with mistakes and criticism rather than smooth and full of praise. This only serves to undermine our sense of self-worth.

We procrastinate to reduce our encounters with imperfection and criticism. That means fewer times we have to tell ourselves, "I'm not good enough. I'm not worthy of love and acceptance." We can put off the task until the last minute and come up with excuses like "I didn't have enough time." We wrongly believe our procrastination is a self-preservation mechanism.

2. Expectations that the process of doing the task or the outcome will be unpleasant

As human beings subject to pleasure and pain, we do our best to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. We tend to stay away from tasks we perceive as unpleasant, that question our competence, or risk our ego. We choose options we think will make us happy in the short-run, with less concern about the consequences for the long-term.

Rebelliousness is often a form of procrastination. We rebels fight authority and the system authority set up. Growing up, we turned to our friends, instead of our parents, to validate our excuses for bucking the system. We resist work that's boring, frustrating, and stifling, even while we're doing it. We dream of breaking out from under the controlling hand of authority.

But, our rebellion isn't typically based on a burning desire to create an alternative world or to take responsibility for our lives; we have no real plans. We rebels want to live life on our own terms, but we never create any terms and never get specific about what to go after.

We gossip, meddle, and complain, spending vast amounts of energy commenting about the lame ways of others as whatever dreams we might have had quietly slip away. We hate the unpleasant task of facing ourselves and trade it for procrastination.

3. Reward for our effort is too distant to be meaningful or significant

What happened to all those New Year's resolutions we made through the years? How many did we keep? How difficult was it? For us shortsighted procrastinators, it was pretty much impossible.

With a year-long view, we set ourselves up for pain, suffering, and failure. We can procrastinate for months. It's easy to eat a whole pizza and a bowl of nachos in March when there's "still so much time left" in the year to meet our weight-loss goal. Unfortunately, few of us are able to stop ourselves; instead of 10 lbs. to lose in a year, in December we have 25 lbs. to lose in a month, and become overwhelmed.

Every aspect of our lives suffers when we operate from this mentality: our relationships, our income, our retirement plans, how we raise our kids, our health, and a lot more. Trying to play catch-up later requires far more energy than getting on track now.

The problem is the long view is frequently dreamed up with visions of grandeur but little preparation and planning. This kind of procrastination is guaranteed to result in disappointment. We have to find a way to shorten the time frame and make the costs or

consequences of procrastination more immediate.

4. Difficulties in managing ourselves

We procrastinators frequently say things like "I'll get to it later" or "I didn't have enough time." Time is an external factor we can point to; we can blame a lack of time for our failure to act. But the issue is not an external one of time management; it's an internal one having everything to do with our self-management.

Our capacity to regulate ourselves is limited. Our energy and willpower fluctuate throughout the day. Most of us have no idea how to build our work and home schedules around the energy available at specific times of the day. We don't know how to focus so we can use the energy as effectively as possible. We don't know when rest is necessary and beneficial.

We're so scared of mistakes, consequences, lack of validation, and punishment that we either sit around doing nothing, as in scenario 1, or we run, run, run, chasing too many things, as in scenario 2.

We procrastinators are so bad at managing ourselves that we don't even realize that the short-term pleasure we're seeking is actually bad for us. We think we're avoiding pain by ignoring what's good for us – that's how much pain we're in.

3 of our favorite procrastination myths

We have countless reasons – justifications and rationalizations – for procrastinating. Here are three classic myths:

1. We perform better under pressure at the last minute.

No, no we don't. When we think it's our best work, the only thing we really know is that the project got done and there weren't any negative consequences. Of course, we celebrate the fact that our "system" of last-minute scrambling worked, and reinforce the idea that it's an effective tool. But we're really celebrating our willingness to do the minimum required while the world around us is racing ahead.

We don't see what the finished product *could have looked like* if we started earlier. And we don't see the fear underlying our procrastination. Or the opportunities we would've had if we finished the project sooner. Or how we inconvenienced people when we cancelled plans in order to finish the project. Or the bad sleep and diet we had during the project.

2. This place is too messy. We can't work until after we clean the house.

The house doesn't have to be clean in order for us to work. The house doesn't have anything to do with our work, but it may have something to do with our fear of the work. Trying to create the perfect conditions in which to work is an exercise in futility (and procrastination). And, no, the clock doesn't have to be striking the hour and our pencils don't have to be perfectly lined up before we can get to work.

3. We need to have a lot of uninterrupted time to get things done.

A wonderful discovery to make is how much we can get done in a short amount of time. When faced with 5, 15, or 30 minutes of spare time, many of us turn to video games, Facebook, television, or any number of distractions to kill that time. We rationalize the distractions by convincing ourselves we can't dive into anything in such a short period of time.

Once we acknowledge that there are many different tasks, projects, and responsibilities, all demanding various amounts and types of attention, we can begin to use time differently. Five minutes is a lot if all we try to get done is take out the garbage and straighten our desks. We don't need hours of uninterrupted time to get things done.

Why what we're doing to stop procrastination isn't working

One of the main reasons our efforts to fight procrastination don't work is that procrastination works for us. It's giving us what we want in the short-term, and we haven't developed any long-term vision. We postpone pain in order to feel pleasure. Our efforts to deal with procrastination are largely declarations followed up by...more procrastination.

Second, like coming to terms with any fear and changing long-standing habits, dealing with procrastination requires a plan. Most of the time, we don't know how to create an effective plan, and we're simply not willing or able to seek the right help and do the hard work of facing our imperfect selves. We're comfortable with our old thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions about who we need to be to ourselves and to other people. Without addressing those, nothing will change.

Third, since we don't have a plan, we probably haven't thought much about the various components that would make up a plan. For example, we know we have to learn how to say no to people, but we haven't actually worked out how to do it. The mechanisms we need require specific thought patterns and responses. It is these patterns and responses that will activate when procrastination rears its head again, and help us make new, different, and better choices. But, if we haven't learned them, there's nothing to activate. Unfortunately, we can't just flip a switch and stop procrastinating.

How procrastination is more of a problem than we realize

The costs associated with procrastination are pretty high, more than we might think.

The biggest cost, of course, is that we never get to live our dreams, or we work in such a haphazard way that the effect is the same. For us procrastinators, it's easy to be timid in our pursuits so that we never know failure and won't have to face inadequacy. Ironically, by taking the procrastination road, we are failing and being inadequate.

Related to missing out on our dreams, naturally we miss the countless opportunities that present themselves along the road of life. Opportunities don't typically wait, at least not for as long as we procrastinators delay. As a result, we settle for far less in our lives than would otherwise be possible – and most of the time, we don't even know it.

Procrastination can strain or even ruin relationships.

The health costs of procrastination are probably less noticeable in the short run or at least are not attributed to procrastination. Researchers have linked compromised immune systems, colds, flu, gastrointestinal problems, and insomnia to procrastination.

On the social side, procrastination can strain or even ruin relationships. Teamwork and morale at work are impacted. Failure to pay bills on time or file important documents can tear families apart. As we continue to procrastinate, people will stop trusting us to get the job done in a manner that's acceptable.

When we are stuck in procrastination mode, in essence the world goes racing by us as we're standing still. What we think of as short-term victories, like getting work done at the last minute, are really losses. With those habits, we'll never get ahead of the curve; by definition, we procrastinate – whether in scenario 1 or scenario 2 – are not proactive and are not making the progress we think we are.

This all sounds like a pile of depressing news. But, the fact of the matter is, there are numerous ways, some quick and easy, others requiring reflection and time, that we can use to make major shifts in our lives.

Three ways to eliminate procrastination

When facing any problem, it's critical to understand its nature. At the beginning of this article, I laid out the four reasons for procrastination, as determined by researchers. In order to do something about our procrastination, we have to find ways to counter those reasons. We need to create a plan that addresses the underlying causes of our procrastination and gives us support on a daily basis.

1. Create understanding.

Developing self-awareness is critically important in eliminating procrastination. Indeed, self-awareness is called the most important practice in a wide variety of books, including those on spirituality, theology, psychology, self-help, time management, relationships, business, and many others. It is a key to unlocking all other issues. When we create an understanding of who we are and what we want, the rest is a matter of execution.

This understanding is the blueprint – our success plan – not only for forward motion, but steps to take when forward motion comes to a halt. That is, a plan for dealing with procrastination.

What should we include in this plan?

We need to understand our likes and dislikes, our talents and skills, our strengths and weaknesses.

For starters, lots and lots of questions. We need to understand our likes and dislikes, our talents and skills, our strengths and weaknesses. How do we want to spend our time? What kind of life do we want to have? What stirs our passions? Where do we want to live? How much money do we want to make? This seems like a lot, but there are many exercises that are relatively quick and effective that can help determine our direction.

We need to question our beliefs and our assumptions. Some of them may be faulty in some way, preventing us from moving forward. We can ask questions about where we came from, who we listened to, what their philosophies were, and how they continue to impact us today. We can decide which of our perspectives and mindsets need to be changed because they're standing in our way.

Through such exercises we engage in values clarification (who we are) and goal setting (where we are going). We need not be intimidated by these exercises. When we start to go through them, we will see miracles happen in our lives like we never thought possible.

2. Create mechanisms.

As we start to understand who we are and where we're headed, the third key issue is how we are going to get there. What will the process look like? What practices, habits, and tools do we have to create for ourselves in order to make the journey? I call these practices, habits, and tools "mechanisms" – interconnected and coordinated pieces that help our system run as smoothly as possible.

These mechanisms deal with a wide range of practical approaches to getting things done. One of the major mechanisms is surrounding ourselves with positive people who are more successful than us. We reach out to people who have already been through what we're trying to do, which saves a massive amount of time and frustration.

This friend, mentor, coach, or advisor can help us create the time management and self-management approaches necessary to dramatically increase productivity. When we reconfigure our sense of time, create deadlines, and build in accountability, we can achieve more in a shorter amount of time than we ever thought possible.

One great example of this is creating artificial deadlines. Instead of making New Year's resolutions, we make weekly, monthly, or quarterly time limits. In this way, we create very specific goals that have to be met in a very short period of time; we increase our productivity; we reduce our fear; and we decrease the likelihood of procrastination setting in.

The system we are creating includes practical ways to pull ourselves up when we start backsliding. Things like praise files – where we keep cards, notes, excellent school papers, letters of commendation, or just an email message saying how we made someone's day – are simple, yet powerful, reminders that we have a lot to offer and our procrastination serves no one, not even ourselves.

We also are careful not to forget the power of people. Beyond our coach or mentor, we need to create a network of friends and colleagues who we can help any way possible as they assist us in our endeavors. One of the most debilitating effects of procrastination is the impact it has on relationships as well as our own mindset that we can go it alone. We need a support system that helps us, among other things, get out of our own heads.

3. Create compassion and forgiveness.

We might ask, "What do compassion and forgiveness have to do with our procrastination?" Everything. The compassion and forgiveness are not for other people; they're for ourselves.

It's time we got off our own backs.

First, we can help ourselves by understanding there is no such thing as perfection. Whenever we create something, there are always critics nearby waiting to comment. The simple fact of the matter is that individuals are so diverse in their backgrounds, with varying experiences and perspectives, there's always more than one way of looking at something. Nothing will be "perfect."

We need to be focused on our internal excellence rather than external criticism. After all, critics are also dealing with their own issues, psychologies, and experiences; we don't know what their motivations to criticize might be.

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worthy just because a
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Second, so often when we strive for perfection, we're attempting to prove that we're worthy of love, especially love from parents. When we have compassion and forgiveness for ourselves, we can start to realize that, from the beginning, we were made whole, made perfect, and made lovable. We do not become worthy just because a specific person says we are; we already are and always have been.

The issue we're really tied up with here is that we don't understand or like how people around us (parents, in this case) express their love and attention toward us. That has nothing to do with whether we're worthy of love. When we develop compassion and forgiveness for ourselves, we frequently end up extending it to others; in the process of getting off our own backs, we can get off their backs, too.

Third, when procrastination and the fear associated with it start to creep in, we need to turn toward the pain, not run from it. Our procrastination is our way of avoiding pain, and we know that doesn't work. Indeed, it is our determination not to experience pain that keeps us on the procrastination path.

Turning toward the pain will change everything. We will have new insights, new opportunities, new relationships, and a new vision. The understanding and the mechanisms are central to eliminating procrastination, and when we make a decision to live in the spirit of compassion and forgiveness, amazing things will happen.

About Dr. Joe

Joe Serio is a keynote speaker, trainer, author, and former coward who is known for his work in investigating the Russian Mafia. His Get the Nerve™ series of books and workshops empower people to live their dreams.

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