

Staying on Track – Escaping Procrastination

Procrastination is when we find ways to delay doing tasks that are helpful for us to complete. Sometimes we need to purposefully delay tasks when we are sick, have higher priorities, if we don't have all the resources we need, or when we want to look at something with a fresh mind later. But even these can become ways to procrastinate. So, here are some quick tips to help you achieve your tasks and to increase your motivation.

Warm up your mind to the task

- Be specific about what study tasks you are avoiding. Is it sitting at your desk, writing, revision, reading, giving presentations, exam preparation, finishing assignments, etc?
- Make sure that the task to be done is one that you actually want to do, that there are benefits for you in carrying out this task and that it fits with your priorities and goals. List the advantages of getting the task done and the disadvantages of not doing it.
- Write a dialogue with the part of you that doesn't want to do the task. This brings your inner conflicts into awareness. Challenge the part of you that doesn't want to do it.
- Plan tasks in advance; even visualise yourself doing the task so that you can start getting all the resources needed to complete the task. Also, have visible reminders of the tasks to be done – signs, notes, lists, slogans, a weekly and a yearly planner.
- Spend a few minutes in advance thinking about what you want to achieve the next time you sit down to work and how you will get started. You can do this while lying in bed, doing the washing up or having your early morning walk.
- Set mental 'warm up' tasks to get started. For example, re-reading notes, brainstorming ideas, organising your material.

Set yourself goals

- Set time limits. List the tasks you plan to do at a single sitting and how long you expect each will take to complete. If the task takes longer than you anticipate, use that new knowledge to help you estimate how long future tasks will take.
- When tempted to give up, check what's caused you to lose energy. If you're avoiding an aspect of the task, problem-solve a way of approaching it. Take a few minutes to review your progress and set a new goal, or work 5 more minutes before taking a break. This could get you past your stuck spot. Tell yourself it's OK to get stuck sometimes, or to learn from mistakes, as long as this doesn't become a new way of procrastinating!
- Make an agreement with yourself to put off something you want to do until you have completed a specific task. Make something you normally like to do your reward for getting the job done.
- Make a wall chart on which you demonstrate your progress/achievements.

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- With a large task that appears overwhelming, list the steps needed to complete the task, and focus on one step at a time rather than the whole task. There is no need to see the task as an ‘all or nothing’ one. Perhaps start with the most unpleasant aspect of the task, working down to easier aspects. Or try easier aspects first as a warm-up to the more unpleasant aspects.
- Work on a large or an unpleasant task for a minimum of 10 minutes a day. If you then want to keep going with the task, just stay with it.
- Make a contract with a friend, letting them know specifically what you plan to achieve and by when. Then contact them to let them know how you went.

Make physical changes

- Have a stretch, change your posture, or try exercising during your study break.
- Arrange your work environment to be attractive and inviting. For example, aim for good lighting and ventilation, maybe some relaxing music, and less clutter.
- Go to a different place to work, where your usual distractions are not present. Try your local library, or book into a motel (if you can afford to) and have the TV removed.
- Arrange to work alongside somebody who works well. Find friends who are active and who get things done, and use them as role models.
- Get somebody to help you. For example, to act as a sounding board for you to work out a decision, or clarify your ideas.

Stay positive

Adopt a positive attitude to decision making. Stop envisaging it as a choice between getting it right and getting it wrong. Most decisions will have pros and cons to each option. In other words, whichever path you choose will be okay! This attitude can free up people who are paralysed at the point of having to make a decision.

Replace any negative thoughts about the task such as ‘The task is too large’, ‘It won’t be good enough’ with positive, realistic and helpful thoughts like ‘The task is manageable’, ‘I can be successful without being perfect’, ‘I’m an intelligent, capable and competent person’, ‘I’m feeling scared, but I don’t need to be’, ‘I have completed tasks before, so I can complete this one’, and so on.

Visualise yourself successfully carrying out your task and enjoying the benefits. Visualise past occasions when you successfully completed your tasks. Take this last tip a step further and imagine yourself as a well-organised person who doesn’t procrastinate. Pretend to be that person. Notice how they think, feel and act.

For further free information and support contact UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS):

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