

On My Mind: Procrastination and precrastination

Most of us are familiar with procrastination, the tendency to put off until tomorrow what could be done today. In its most adaptive form, it allows us to mull over tasks before taking action, gives us time to perform tasks that are more important, and allows for more time to relax. On the other hand, it can also cause us stress as deadlines approach. Its cousin, “precrastination,” is a term coined in 2014, and is the tendency to immediately address things on the to-do list. It is adaptive in that it helps us to be productive, but it has the drawback of sometimes making us act hastily, when taking more time to ponder things might have made us do certain tasks better. Both procrastination and precrastination are ways of avoiding uncomfortable feelings; when overdone, both can interfere with functioning at our best.

Modern life is stressful and full of fears for the future. Stress, anxiety, depression, and even boredom are uncomfortable feelings, and both precrastination and procrastination can lead to relief from such feelings. “What?” you say, “Procrastination has led me to feeling embarrassed and like a failure. How is that relief?” Two recent articles about this subject in the New York Times (see [bit.ly/NYTWhyProcrastinate](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/mind-procrastination-precrastination.html) and [bit.ly/DoEarly](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/mind-precrastination.html)) suggest that we are programmed to focus on short-term rewards. Simple, easily performed tasks are actually more rewarding to our brains. We tend to engage in such tasks when avoiding tackling a larger, more complex project. Most of us have done a lot of dishes and washed a lot of laundry while avoiding starting something more complex, like preparing one’s taxes. In fact, this monthly column is late because, during a particularly busy period, I sometimes found it more pleasing to surf the web, play a computer game, or check the weather than to sit down and start writing. Such behaviors, with their instant rewards, can in a sense become addicting. And like any addiction, procrastination can ultimately wreak havoc on self-esteem, productivity, and mood. Then, when having procrastinated makes one feel ashamed and plagued by feelings of worthlessness and despair, short-term relief becomes all the more rewarding, and the cycle is reinforced.

Precrastination, that urge to get everything done instantly, can also offer considerable relief for someone who suffers from uncomfortable feelings that are

induced by procrastination, among other things. Not unlike the calm that comes from playing one more computer game, getting the article written a month in advance, returning every work email on the weekend or shopping for Christmas in April can feel great. But precrastination has its downsides, too. Some tasks are performed better after a bit of percolation time. Also, precrastination, like procrastination, can become addictive. Compulsively checking the inbox, returning texts, staying at work late to get every bit of work done can interfere with family life, self-care, love, and play. I have a friend who recently told me that if she doesn't read and respond to work emails through the weekend, she is unable to relax because of the fear that she will be overwhelmed on Monday morning. Her kind boss's reminder that she should leave work for work hours doesn't stop the compulsion.

Most of us precrastinate to some extent. One researcher tasked subjects with picking up two sets of balls set at a distance from one another and bringing them both back to the starting point. Eighty percent of people picked up the first set on their way to the second set, therefore carrying them farther than necessary. Checking the task off the list is a relief, and offers a brain reward. When the same subjects were given a list of numbers to memorize while performing the task, the percentage who precrastinated by picking up the first set of balls and carrying them to the second set increased to 90 percent. When our to-do list is longer, when we are more stressed, the impulse to relieve ourselves by getting the task out of the way becomes stronger.

Sonya Lazarevic, M.D., an expert on mindfulness and meditation, told me that in New York City, precrastination is an epidemic. "New York is the epicenter of overachievers. Everyone is on their cell phones 24/7." She sees patients who are "exhausted by how much they feel compelled to achieve ... we are doing too much, and lose the joy of the present moment ... Doing things ahead of time to get them off the plate is related to anxiety." Sonya believes that the antidote to the anxiety that leads many down the path of procrastination and precrastination lies in the practice of refocusing on being present for each moment, noticing and enjoying the here and now. "You get more done because you are calm in the present ... If you do just one thing at a time, and are only present for that task, it quiets the mental chatter. If I catch myself thinking about the past and the future when doing a task, I return my focus to my breath or body, and I am back in the present, which oddly enough helps me get tasks done with greater ease, efficiency, and joy." When calm and in the present, there is no need to precrastinate or procrastinate.

Bob Pozen, author of “Extreme Productivity: Boost Your Results, Reduce Your Hours,” senior lecturer at MIT, former president of Fidelity Investments and part-time Vineyarder, doesn’t see precrastination as much of a problem for most people. When I spoke with him, he was taking a break from working on a project that wasn’t due for a month. He pointed out that most of us spend less than half our time on things that are not priorities and are therefore not as productive. “Of course there are organizational constraints like the need to attend meetings and return emails, but the bigger problem is that people can forget what their priorities are ... No. 1 is ranking your goals and integrating them into your schedule accordingly.” Because part of reaching goals often involves boring or repetitive tasks, Bob suggests breaking them into manageable pieces and giving yourself a reward for completing each piece. “When I have to grade exams, I might plan to do 20 and then have a bowl of ice cream.” He points out that “everyone procrastinates, it is just a matter of degree.” As he sees it, understanding why you are procrastinating is key. “If it is because you are afraid you don’t know enough, get help. If it is because the task is boring, break it into pieces. If it is because you are afraid of failing, just get going with the parts that you know you can do.” Like Sonya Lazaravic, Bob puts a big emphasis on down time, leaving work at work, cherishing life’s joys, and particularly on spending time with friends and family. Such strategies mute anxiety and make it easier to get things done.

Understanding one’s tendencies to procrastinate or precrastinate from a psychological perspective can be helpful long-term. I once knew a man who wanted to be a lawyer like his high-powered, critical, and competitive father. After delaying taking the prerequisite courses for law school, he finally enrolled, but procrastinated about studying, and found that his performance on tests was undermined by high anxiety. During tests his heart pounded. He hyperventilated, and his mind slowed down or even went blank. In therapy, he came to realize that as a child, he was terrified of his father’s anger and disappointment. He had learned that being passive, turning his mind off, and not challenging his father were good survival mechanisms. Now he imagined comforting the frightened boy. In his mind, he explained to the boy that his father was struggling with his own demons, but that no parent should ever treat a child the way he was treated. He imagined holding the boy and reassuring him that he was there to protect him and wouldn’t allow his father or anyone else to be mean to him again. With time and therapy, he felt calmer, studying came more easily, and the test-taking anxiety disappeared. He has been successfully practicing law for some years now.

As for my own procrastination about getting this article done, it is comforting to think about Bob's point with regard to priorities. During the past six weeks, this article just wasn't my top priority. Seeing that allowed me to accept the delay, reduce my distress, and make it easier to stay in the present. I knew that it would get done when my broader workload was reduced. When, eventually, I had the time and space to write, the biggest obstacle was getting started. The turning point was when I set myself the simple goal of typing "On My Mind ...". Once I engaged the task-oriented part of my brain, the procrastination disappeared, and words flowed.

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