

Why Do We Procrastinate?

We can all relate to this situation: You have a task that needs to get done, but you don't feel like doing it right now. So you put it off, delay it until it feels even more overwhelming the next time you think about it. It's procrastination, and even though it's not exactly a medical problem, it is something that can have a real and profound effect on our lives if it's not addressed.

There are many reasons why people procrastinate, says Firdaus S. Dhabhar, Ph.D., a professor in the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry, Department of Microbiology & Immunology, and Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center.

“People may procrastinate to avoid doing things that may seem difficult, complicated, time-consuming, stressful, or worrisome.”

The Association for Psychological Science says that chronic procrastinators may have some psychological similarities.

A study of 212 students found that their tendency to procrastinate correlated strongly with executive functioning or our ability to plan, focus, and remember. Other research has shown the role that negative moods and emotions can play in procrastination.

Procrastination can also become a vicious cycle, as the delay can further instigate

feelings of guilt, anger, and other negative emotions. Nevertheless, Dr. Dhabhar cautions against turning procrastination into a medical disorder.

The implications of procrastination

While procrastination is sometimes discussed in a light-hearted or joking manner, Dr. Dhabhar says there can be real negative implications for those who do it habitually.

“Some procrastination can lead to more procrastination, which can additionally affect tasks for which you don’t want to procrastinate,” he says. “Overall, it can lower performance, productivity, and creativity, as well as increase chronic stress. In a team or work setting, it can have a negative effect for members of the team who are waiting on certain tasks to be completed so that they can do their part.”

When it comes to avoiding serious issues, such as relationship problems or a cancer diagnosis, Psychology Today says it can start to take a significant emotional toll on you.

By pushing back emotions or situations, rather than confronting them, you can allow them to accumulate until they begin to feel overwhelming. That’s when issues like the stress that Dr. Dhabhar mentioned above, or worse, can become an issue.

Put a stop to procrastination

While procrastination is common and can lead to some genuine problems in some instances, it is not unavoidable. Dr. Dhabhar says some changes in your attitude and approach to tasks are often the key to procrastinating less and getting more done.

Break things into smaller tasks.

“If possible, divide the project into more manageable, bite-sized chunks that can be completed within contiguous amounts of time,” says Dr. Dhabhar. “Start working on each piece of the project, and upon completion, pick up the next piece within a reasonable amount of time.”

Jump right in.

In many cases, all the thinking before a task overwhelms the procrastinator and causes the delay.

“Provided you can do so safely, try jumping into the project without thinking about why you could put it off and focus on something else,” says Dr. Dhabhar. “This may be difficult at first but can get easier over time.”

Put away your phone.



A very modern cause of procrastination is the endless possibilities of digital or social media, so Dr. Dhabhar recommends avoiding these sources of distraction while you’re trying to focus.

Help others be confident.

“Sometimes people may procrastinate because they feel that they are not qualified enough to do the task,” says Dr. Dhabhar. “In such cases, one should try to compassionately mentor the person, build their confidence and enable them to believe in their ability to complete the task. Very often, the ability to do what is needed lies within the person, and all it takes is a supervisor, colleague, or friend to work with the person and help them realize their potential.”

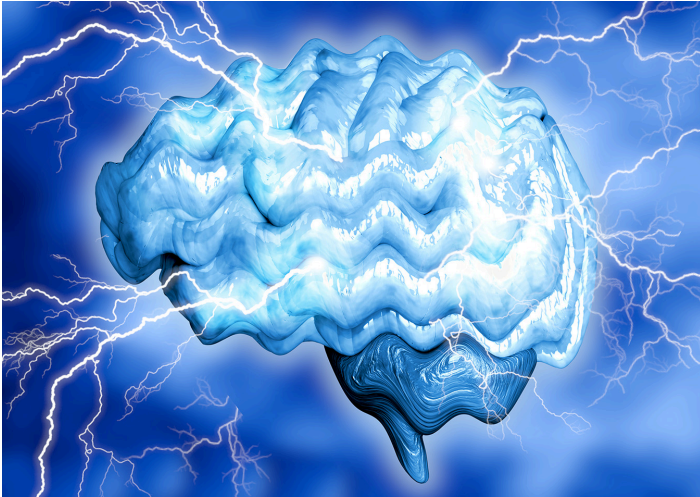
Reward yourself.

You’re more likely to complete a project if you have something fun waiting for you on the other side, says Dr. Dhabhar.

“If possible, time your work on the project so that you have something exciting to look forward to soon after you’re done.”

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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