

The Psychology of Procrastination

Dr. Mark H. Kavanaugh, PhD.

What is Procrastination?

In essence, Procrastination is the practice of carrying out less urgent tasks in preference to more urgent ones, or more pleasurable things in place of less pleasurable things.

Is Procrastination a Problem?

Yes, it can represent a severe problem to success not only in school but in health, family, career, etc.

Does Procrastination mean I'm Dumb?

Procrastination is a habit like any other "bad" habit you may have. What makes a person "dumb" is refusing to do anything about it!

The Psychology of Procrastination

Psychology seeks to describe, explain, predict, and ultimately control behavior. Psychology has a pretty good handle on what procrastination is and what you can do to change this habit. The question is...do you want to change?

Two major concepts are involved in the understanding of Procrastination:

1. Low and High Cognitive Load Tasks
2. Fear of Failure

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Low and High Cognitive Load Tasks

This relates to the definition of Procrastination at the top of this page. Consider low cognitive load tasks as “less urgent” and “pleasurable” while high cognitive load tasks are “more urgent” and “less pleasurable”.

Time for an example:

Washing the Dishes

vs.

Doing online research to find Peer Reviewed articles for a Paper

WHICH IS LESS/MORE URGENT?

WHICH IS LESS/MORE PLEASURABLE?

Here it is...just like in the definition...we Procrastinate when we choose to do Low Cognitive Load Tasks and ignore High Cognitive Load Tasks

This is the basic PLEASURE PRINCIPLE from Freud...we will seek out activities that give us PLEASURE and move away from activities that give us PAIN.

Values and Low Cognitive Load Tasks

One of the most common tricks we can play on ourselves it to VALUE the Low Cognitive Load Tasks very high.

Example: A GOOD MOTHER has a clean house, attends to all the kids' needs, cooks amazing dinners, etc. etc. (Yes, it can be a FATHER too!)

We use this EXCUSE to PRIORITIZE Low Cognitive Tasks because being a good parent is so important to us!

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Fear of Failure

Psychologists and educators (and Olympians) have known for a long time that if there is a real possibility of FAILING, people may work harder to make sure they don't fail. This is the STRESS you feel when you are about to be tested or when you have to do a paper. (That is IF you value grades as a part of who you are and who you want to be.)

Some people are MORE sensitive to this than others...which makes some people work harder to avoid failure when others don't.

BUT...there is a confusing trick. Consider this statement and if it is true:

If I don't hand in the assignment and I fail that is better than handing in the assignment and failing.

Saving Face with Procrastination

Sometimes our Fear of Failure can get the best of us and we make an unconscious decision to NOT try and thus the above statements helps us save face (we might even RATIONALIZE that IF we HAD submitted the assignment, we would have been fine...but...well, I was being a GOOD MOTHER and the WORLD NEEDS GOOD MOTHERS!!!)

You see where this can go???

Ask Yourself Some Questions:

1. Why do I need to succeed?
2. Is my measure of "success" always to be the "best"?
3. Who are the valuable people in my life that I'm trying to impress?
4. Why do I think that failing makes me a "FAILURE"?

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The VALUE of Failure

I'm going to counter each one of these questions with solid psychological advice...choose to take it if you wish!

Why do I need to succeed?

In actuality, you need to FAIL. You actually learn more by failing than you do by succeeding. Failure tells you what you need to learn, do, improve...succeeding (particularly getting a 100) tells you nothing. What do you know when you get a 100? You don't know!

Is my measure of "success" always to be the "best"?

This is indicative in our society. We are obsessed with the BEST of everything and we place high value on this. While there is nothing wrong with striving to be the best we have to see the value of doing MY BEST, not the best based on an outside measure...see the next one!

Who are the valuable people in my life that I'm trying to impress?

Don't tell me this is all for you...if that is the case, you are a very, very lonely person. We all have people in our lives whose opinions we value. We give them this power because we trust they will praise us when we succeed and help us when we fall. Are all the people on your list WORTHY of being there?

Why do I think that failing makes me a "FAILURE"?

This is that big "self-esteem" thing. But it really isn't self-esteem. It is WISDOM. Consider this play on the famous Serenity Prayer...

God, grant me the **SERENITY** to accept the things I'm not good at
The **COURAGE** to focus on the things I am good at
And the **WISDOM** to know the difference

FAILURE ONCE AGAIN is the BEST teacher of what you are good at and what you are not good at...granted, you have to TRY hard and DO hard, but you do this with the mind of self-discovery as much as self-definition!

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High and Low Cognitive Load Tasks

Contending with the BEHAVIORAL aspect of Procrastination is all about TIME and TASK management. Everyone in this room has the same amount of time a day and some very successful people are way busier than you are. How do they do it?

Time Management

You are in school to create a future for yourself...you ADDED this to your schedule so something needs to go! (BECAUSE SCHOOL IS MORE IMPORTANT)

- No more TV
- No more movies
- No more going out
- Etc.

You now have to EARN these things by doing the IMPORTANT THINGS!

WEEKLY CALENDAR ACTIVITY – IDENTIFY WORK WINDOWS IN YOUR WEEK
(If you don't have enough of these then you will need to cut back or you will not be successful...or you will be sick...and not be successful)

Task Management (one day at a time)

Here are the steps that I take, mostly successfully, to take on High and Low Cognitive Load Tasks in a given day:

1. List all the things I want to get done.
2. Break down the tasks into smaller pieces (this might depend on your cognitive style)
3. List the High Cognitive Load Tasks in order of importance
4. List the Low Cognitive Load Tasks in order of importance
5. Create a "To Do" list that alternates between High and Low tasks for the duration of my "Work Windows" in time increments that make sense to me.

General Task List - Prioritized - DAILY

High Cognitive Tasks	Low Cognitive Tasks

High/Low Prioritized To Do List - DAILY

#	Hi/Lo	Task
1	H	
2	L	
3	H	
4	L	
5	H	
6	L	
7	H	
8	L	
9	H	
10	L	
11	H	
12	L	
13	H	
14	L	
15	H	
16	L	
17	H	
18	L	
19	H	
20	L	
21	H	
22	L	
23	H	
24	L	
After you have achieved your goal for a day...reward yourself with the TV, movies, reading, going out, etc. EARN THAT RECREATION TIME!!!		