

Pushing Past

Procrastination

By Michael Wiederman, PhD

We seem to come up with all kinds of reasons for procrastination. Some have to do with the particular task: “I simply don’t have time right now,” or “I’m waiting for _____, then I’ll be ready to tackle it.” If these were the real reasons, though, we would dive into the troublesome task when the realistic obstacles were resolved.

Then there are the reasons for procrastination in general: “I’m just lazy,” or “I must have a self-defeating personality.” These reasons don’t explain why we have these apparent character flaws, and they certainly don’t point to a solution short of major psychotherapy or a personality change.

To behavioral psychologists, however, procrastination is not a mystery requiring different explanations for different cases, nor does it require reflection on a person’s individual character. Instead, procrastination can be explained by our very natural preference for positive over negative experiences. Typically, the tasks we procrastinate over are not pleasant, or at least not something we look forward to doing, so it makes perfect sense that we avoid them.

Present vs. Future Outcomes

“Well, it may not be fun, but it’s something I have to get done, and having it hanging over my head is a negative experience. So, shouldn’t that motivate me to get it over with?” That would be the case if we always weighed positive and negative experiences logically and with no concern for timing. Instead, we tend to be more influenced by the immediate outcome and discount the

future outcome. In other words, a positive or negative outcome right now tends to hold more power over our behavior than a positive or negative outcome sometime down the road, even if the later outcome is larger in an absolute sense.

Let’s consider what this phenomenon looks like with a common example: cleaning up some big area that has gotten out of control, perhaps a garage, yard, or spare room.

We know the space needs to be tackled, but it’s going to be a somewhat big project, and we’re not looking forward to it. Sure, having such a mess bothers us, and we may be able to imagine the end result, complete with feeling satisfaction (or at least relief). However, right this minute we face a decision: get started on the dreaded big job or put it off (just a little while, right?) and do something else.

There are always many “something elses” that are less dreadful than the big project. So, the immediate consequence that is more attractive (do something else) wins out. Notice that we may not let ourselves do “something else” that is actually enjoyable, perhaps because we’d feel guilty. So instead, we may choose to tackle a smaller, less dreadful chore first. If we choose enough of these lesser of two evils, we may just run out of time to get around to the big project right now. Whew! Saved once again.

Whether the “something else” is actually enjoyable or simply less dreadful, choosing it over the big project is reinforced because the choice is less punishing at the moment. Behaviors that are

reinforced are more likely to be chosen the next time a similar situation presents itself. So, we find ourselves continually putting off the things that have to be done but are not pleasant.

Sometimes people will say, “But wait. The thing I’m procrastinating over is actually something I want to do. I just never seem to get around to doing it.” To the behavioral psychologist, the proof is in the behavior. Often we say we want to do something when what we really mean is that we want to have it done, perhaps for the sense of accomplishment or for the end result. That’s not really the same as wanting to do the task itself (finding the doing part rewarding). In other instances, the task itself is actually enjoyable, but engaging in it requires a good deal of preparation or a time commitment that is the “negative” aspect canceling out the positive of the activity itself.

Overcoming Procrastination

Understanding the behavioral dynamics underlying procrastination still leaves us with the question of what to do to overcome it. A core strategy is to build in ways to boost the positive outcomes for tackling the undesirable job. Rather than wait for completion of the task to serve as the reinforcement, we need to add explicit rewards we only allow for ourselves if we meet the goal related to the task we’ve been putting off. The rewards have to be something meaningful to us, such as watching our favorite television program or reading the next chapter in the book we hate to put down. Actually, simply not allowing ourselves to eat until we’ve met our goal would be an effective means of ensuring we get started on the big project sooner rather than later.

Notice that I used the phrase “meeting our goal” before getting a valued reward rather than “completing the project.” One reason the undesirable task creates anxiety or dread is because it may seem overwhelming or will realistically involve much time and effort. It’s important to break it down into smaller steps, each with its own defined goal and subsequent reinforcement. Now the positives clearly outweigh the negatives, even in the short-term (where it matters). Once started, many times the dreaded task turns out not to be nearly as negative as we imagined.

Putting Off Exercise

Now let’s consider a final example that is all too common: procrastination over some fitness goal, such as going to the gym or running. Physically exerting ourselves is a negative experience. Naturally, biological beings prefer rest over exertion. Some people claim to like the panting, grunting, and sweating, but if we look closer it tends to be what the physical exertion means to the person that reinforces it, not the actual physiological experience. In other words, people who “like” exercise or who appear to be self-disciplined reward themselves during the activity, most commonly with thoughts about what the activity means to them, their health and appearance, and so forth.

Assuming we’re not among those who already have mastered the art of self-reinforcement for exercise, we must do so explicitly. First, though, we want to start small, to make sure that we will have experience successfully meeting our goal and getting reinforced for doing so. If running 3 miles a day is our goal but we’re not running at all now, we need to start with walking briskly for, say, 15 minutes. If our goal is to work out at the gym an hour

four days a week, perhaps our immediate goal would be to go today, for at least 20 minutes.

At this point some people object to the fact that we’re focusing on such small steps toward the end goal. Some people may feel impatient, as though they should be able to “just do it” when it comes to the dreaded activity. Others seem to resist the idea that they should be rewarded for such a small step or “easy” behavior. Because we’re talking about procrastination, though, isn’t some progress better than none? Aren’t small steps in the right direction more likely to get us to the end goal compared to waiting for just the right circumstances when we’re suddenly going to tackle the problem once and for all?

It’s important to predetermine what the reinforcement will be for meeting today’s (or tomorrow’s) goal. The key is to make sure the reward is something valuable to us and that we will not allow ourselves to have it until the goal is met. If the reward is being able to watch our favorite television program, we may have to record it or watch it online if we have not performed the desired behavior before the program is broadcast. If we allow ourselves to watch it even if we did not meet our small goal, we simply reinforce further avoidance of the behavior (no matter how much we promise ourselves that we’ll do better next time).

As we become fairly consistent at reaching our small goal each time, we can begin to bump up what it takes to earn the reward. By that time it’s usually not difficult to do because we’ve overcome the inertia that kept us from even beginning the dreaded behavior, often finding that the behavior is no longer as dreaded as it once was. It also helps to reinforce ourselves through our thoughts and self-talk, congratulating ourselves on the steps we’re taking in the right direction.

The Sugar Trick

Let’s end with one last tip. Sometimes we find ourselves mentally depleted, making it especially difficult to override our desire to avoid taking on an effortful task. Research by a variety of psychologists has revealed a simple yet powerful method for giving ourselves a jolt of will-power: tasting something sugary. The explanation is that sugar receptors in the mouth stimulate brain regions associated with reward and motivation, giving us that bit of extra ability to marshal our energy toward an effortful task. Of course relying on sugary treats to boost motivation can undo progress toward fitness and a healthy body weight. The good news is that the receptors are in the mouth, and do not rely on swallowing the sugar. Researchers have demonstrated that simply swishing a sugary drink around in our mouths does just the trick (artificially sweetened drinks have been tested and found not to have the same effect).

The next step is yours. What task have you been putting off? What would be a first step or smaller goal involved in that task? What do you have coming up very soon that could serve as a powerfully motivating reinforcement or reward? Why wait?

Dr. Michael Wiederman is a professor of psychology at Columbia College, a women’s college in Columbia, SC. He has published more than 200 articles, book chapters, and books. *Transcending the Personality Disordered Parent: Psychological and Spiritual Tactics* is a self-help book Dr. Wiederman recently co-wrote. More information can be found at: www.MindingtheMind.com.