

Everyone has been afflicted by procrastination at one time or another, that nagging menace that compels us to put things off for another day, another time. For some people this is a persistent problem, and for others it appears in only some areas of their lives. The result, though, is the same for everyone: increased anxiety, wasted time, poor performance, missed opportunities, guilt, excusing ourselves and avoiding people who depend on us. There are better ways of dealing with the demands of living. Procrastination is not a trivial problem — it causes suffering for many people.

Who is likely to procrastinate? There is no research evidence that gender and intelligence have anything to do with a tendency to procrastinate. Age may have something to do with it. A recent study has found that procrastination peaks in the middle to late twenties, decreases for the next forty years and then increases again in the sixties. Other research has found that people who feel overwhelmed and cannot calm down readily tend to put things off. Similarly, there is a relationship between anxiety and procrastination. It is no surprise that people who fear failure have the problem, as well as people with low self-esteem. People with a poor tolerance for frustration or difficulty delaying gratification, of course, find it difficult to stick with a task until it is completed, and the same holds true for those who cannot concentrate for long. Those who have conflicts with authority figures and are rebellious have been shown to have procrastination proclivities. People with depression, who may have low energy and hold negative thoughts about their ability to get things done, frequently have problems with procrastination. And then there is the perfectionist. Those perfectionists who set their own standards seem to have no problem with "sloth," but those who have adopted the standards set by others do have trouble completing their work. This is because they are sensitive to the evaluations they might receive from others — they want to avoid social disapproval.

Making Up Excuses

We procrastinate

when the dishes don't get done and the bed doesn't get made;

when that term paper is due tomorrow morning and we're sitting in front of the TV;

when we talk about superficial things with our partner rather than confronting some pressing issues that really need to be addressed; or

when we play solitaire on the computer rather than getting the report done that has to be in at 5:00. Clearly, we are not accomplishing those things that need to be done, and to confront the underlying reasons for our procrastination may be either uncomfortable or beyond us. So what do we tell ourselves to justify our behavior? We may use any of a number of excuses — and here are some common ones:

“Never
put off till
tomorrow
what you can
do today.”

The Earl of Chesterfield

December 26, 1749

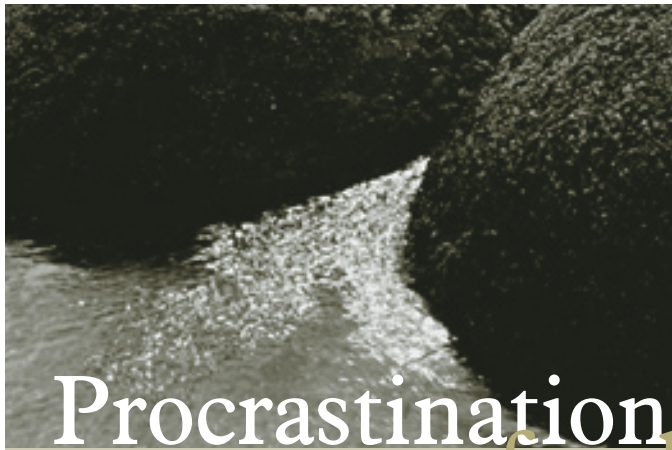


All About Us Biographies

Jody Michael, M.A., L.C.S.W. is founder and president of Jody Michael & Associates, a coaching consultancy that works one-on-one with individuals and small businesses to help them reach their career, executive, small business, and life goals.

She brings to her coaching practice over 15 years of corporate leadership in the finance industry, successful entrepreneurial ventures, teaching credentials, an M.A. and PhD studies from the University of Chicago, and more than eight years of practice applying clinical psychology principles to work-life, career, and business building issues.

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Procrastination can undermine our sense of well being and prevent us from experiencing the full potential of our lives

Getting Bugged Down in Trivia:

We spend our time on tasks which are easy to do and say that we are so busy that we cannot get to the major project. We might answer our phone calls, write a letter, clean the living room, have lunch — anything that we find simple and are emotionally prepared to do — rather than getting to the task that we really have to do. We tell ourselves that we simply had to do these things before tackling our project and there was no time left. We get satisfaction from busying ourselves and alleviate our guilt somewhat, but the major task is never finished.

Putting the Blame Elsewhere:

It is easy to externalize blame. "If only I had gotten that promotion, then I would be more involved in my job." "If only my husband would take out the garbage, I would have time to do the things I need to do." "If I had a faster computer I would find more enjoyment in sitting down to write the report." The problem here is that we selectively focus on one reason and ignore the reality of the total situation. The simple truth is that we have a project to do and we have to take into account everything that helps and impedes us, and then move on from there. Things are seldom perfect in anything we do.

Letting Emotions Interfere With Productivity:

Writing a report might bring up feelings of anxiety — after all, we have to think of the right words, organize it logically, look up relevant information. We might feel overwhelmed because of our past experiences with writing reports. Or a man might feel angry that the lawn has to be mowed, especially when his partner keeps harping on him to get it done (in which case the anger is based in being told what to do, not the grass!). We need to separate our emotions from the task itself. In fact, working at the task gives us a good opportunity to see what our emotions are and to confront them

honestly. This then allows us see where the feelings came from so that we can resolve them. Avoiding painful feelings lets them linger on into the future, but confronting them, especially with the help of a supportive and insightful therapist, can lead to emotional liberation.

Setting Up Roadblocks:

"I'll diet after the holidays." "I'll wait until I'm in the mood to call my old friend." "I'll buy new clothes when I make new friends." Although there may be some logic to all of these strategies, they exemplify a major cause of procrastination. We set up artificial barriers which may have little to do with actually completing the task at hand. When we construct limitations on our ability to work, it makes the completion of the task all the more difficult.

Being Perfect...or Nothing At All:

Our society places great emphasis on doing the best job every time. When we try to please other people, rather than ourselves, we run the risk of rejection and failure. Perfectionism has its place. After all, it can help motivate us to get started and to do the best job we can. But taken to the extreme, perfectionism can also inhibit our efforts completely. "If I can't do the best job possible, I'll do nothing at all...or at least not until I absolutely have to." Coming to terms with perfectionistic tendencies can be a challenging but healthy process. We can examine why we need to please others rather than ourselves, the degree to which this pattern intrudes on various aspects of our lives, and the extent to which it helps us...and hinders us.

Procrastination is a serious problem for many people. It can undermine our sense of well being and prevent us from experiencing the full potential of our lives. A portion of our time is spent pleasurable and a portion is spent on tasks

What's New?

Personal Growth

Jody Michael, keynote speaker at the Union League Club, will present "Choices for Change: A Personal Program for Transformation" to kick off their "Prosperity, Pampering and Personal Growth" the weekend of January 21st.

Website

We invite you to visit us at: www.jodymichaeltherapy.com.

Small Business Alliance

Since inception, JMA has hand picked a small cadre of entrepreneurs that provide consistent high quality product and outstanding customer service at reasonable prices. If client needs arise that are specialized and are outside JMA's expertise, we go to our trusty list of specialized SBA service providers that we and many of our past clients have come to trust. If you would like to meet the team and review their specialties, please visit the Small Business Alliance, located in the 'About Us' section of our website, www.jodymichael.com.

“Procrastination is the thief of time.”

Edward Young 1742

we may not particularly enjoy. Such is the nature of life. To avoid the displeasurable is, unfortunately, to compromise the pleasurable. The person who is emotionally healthy is one who is familiar with and can tolerate the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the light and the dark. Living completely entails embracing our responsibilities, relishing our pleasures, and appreciating our time.

Fourteen Tips for Overcoming Procrastination

Examine your “shoulds.” And this applies to “oughts,” “musts,” and “have to’s.” When we feel obligated to someone else we may feel inhibited. Change these statements to “wants,” and then you assume responsibility yourself for doing a task. Rather than saying, “I should call my son’s teacher,” change it to: “I want to call my son’s teacher.”

Look at your excuses rationally. In fact, make up a list of the excuses you use which prevent you from getting a job done. Then examine each excuse and beside it write out a more realistic thought. For example, “I’m not in the mood” can be reinterpreted to “Mood doesn’t get the job done.”

Use self-motivating statements. How we define a task can alter our motivation for completing it. Many people repeat phrases to themselves, or even tack notes in visible places, which serve to spur them on. Try out phrases like: “The sooner I’m done, the sooner I’m free,” or “There’s no time like the present.”

Make up a To Do List. Write out a list of things you need to do this week (or day...or month) and then cross them off, one by one, when they are done. With this list you can see exactly what needs to be accomplished, and you can get a great sense of fulfillment as the list gets whittled down.

Set priorities. On your To Do list, rank the jobs that need to be done in order of their importance. Then just focus on one job at a time.

Break the task down into smaller pieces.

This is one of the most important ways to combat procrastination. Write down all the steps involved in your project and see each step as a manageable job that can get done with little effort. Even if we dislike some duties, we can handle them if they last only for a short time.

Look at time. We sometimes have a poor conception of how much time it takes to complete a task. Rather than panicking at the thought that you only have a week to get that profit and loss statement together, break the parts of the task down into real time. You may find that this is only a three-hour job.

Take a stand. Write yourself a contract to complete a job and sign it. Or tell a supportive friend that you plan to finish a job by a certain date. Make your project a public endeavor rather than keeping it to yourself. It helps to gain the support of others when you feel stymied.

Organize. Make sure you have a clean work area and all of your materials in front of you. Eliminate distractions like the TV blaring in the background if you need to concentrate. Warn others that you will be unavailable (or unbearable) during a certain time.

Manage your stress. There are a number of techniques one can use to deal with anxiety: deep breathing, progressive relaxation, visualization, physical exercise, relaxation tapes, humor and music. These techniques can be learned in therapy.

Just get started. You don’t have to wait until you feel inspired to write that speech. Just write whatever comes to mind, and you can revise it later. A journey begins with one small step.

Reward yourself when you accomplish a small goal. Rather than procrastinating a whole afternoon by calling friends, call a friend only when you have written a page of the report as a way of rewarding yourself.

How a Coach Can Help You

Whether your career is not quite where you’d like it to be, you’re a small business owner in search of new ideas, or you’re an executive reaching for the next rung, a coach can prove instrumental in helping you identify, accomplish, and achieve. Please refer to ‘Client Case Studies’ and read a few examples of how JMA coaches have helped their clients overcome obstacles and succeed.

A Listening Exercise for Couples

Reciprocal listening is a powerful tool for couples who need to improve their communication. Couples who try this may become aware of how limited their communication has been in the past. They also learn an effective technique, which can increase the respect, trust, and intimacy of their relationship. This exercise may seem structured and perhaps contrived at first, but stay with it. The rewards can be immense.

The couple decides on a minor disagreement that they need to talk about. Each partner takes turns being either the speaker or the listener. The speaker has five minutes to speak without interruption. As speaker, talk about the problem as you see it. Present your argument briefly and stick to the

Look at all you have accomplished. Rather than punishing yourself for not having done enough, take the more positive approach of examining all that you have done. Is the glass half empty or half full?

Celebrate the completion of your task. Have a specific reward in mind for when your project is finished. Go out for dinner. Go to a movie. Take a weekend trip. Have a party. The celebration should be equal to your task.

Can I Really Change an Old Habit Like Procrastination?

Procrastination is such an ingrained pattern that it may seem impossible to change it. While the tips presented on the previous page are effective for many, it may help to see procrastination as a symptom of underlying personality issues. For example, negative self-image often plays a role in our tendency to put off accomplishing tasks. Sometimes we postpone our duties because we lack self-confidence or we feel that we might be rejected by others if we don't turn in a perfect job. Sometimes procrastination is a symptom of depression. Our reasons for procrastinating are as varied as people are different. Therapy is the best way to explore these deeper issues in a supportive, trustworthy and professional setting.

Yes, an old habit like procrastination can be changed. You have to use the techniques that work for you and remember that it is not a simple all-or-nothing "cure." Look on behavior change as a process composed of many steps. You may have success in dealing with some components of the problem only to find later that you are resistant to making more changes. Then, in therapy, you look into your resistance to see why moving on is difficult at a particular stage. And don't forget that most people relapse. Research has found that only about 20 percent of all people make complete changes on their first try. Most people have setbacks during the change process. Expect this to happen and look on it as something positive — after all, you can learn from your setbacks. To relapse does not mean that you have to start all over again.

You can change uncomfortable patterns of behavior, and procrastination, fortunately, is one of those habits most amenable to change. But don't put it off — **just do it!**

point. Be sure to use "I statements" to present your views and don't place the blame on your partner (that is, just talk about how you feel about the conflict without putting your partner in a defensive position). After five minutes your partner (the listener) will verbally summarize what he or she has heard. This allows the speaker to let the listener know if anything has been left out or if it has been misinterpreted. Keep going until the speaker feels that the point has been completely heard.

As the listener, pay close attention to what is being said and try to attune yourself to your partner's needs. When you summarize what your partner has said, make sure you don't disagree, argue, or criticize. Just repeat what you have heard.

Now switch positions. The speaker becomes the listener and the listener, the speaker. Follow the same procedures until the new speaker feels satisfied that his or her position has been understood. It is important to avoid letting this exercise turn into an argument. Because this is such a powerful way of learning to listen and to communicate better, many people prefer to try it with a therapist present, at least for the first few attempts.

New Downtown Location

Continuing our tradition of offering comfortable and convenient locations for our clients, we announce the opening of our new downtown location at 405 N. Wabash. Solid natural materials and a birds-eye view of the Magnificent Mile create an ideal setting that prompts both relaxation and renewal. The ambience metaphorically reflects the new heights and perspective our clients achieve in their one-on-one work with us. Please call and schedule an appointment with us at this provocative setting today.

Our reasons for procrastinating are as varied as people are different

For Further Reading

Living Without Procrastination: How To Stop Postponing Your Life, by Susan M. Roberts. New Harbinger: 1995; ISBN 1572240261; \$12.95.

Do It Now! Break the Procrastination Habit, by William J. Knaus. Wiley: 1998; ISBN 0471173991; \$12.95.

It's About Time! The Six Styles of Procrastination and How to Overcome Them, by Linda Sapadin and Jack Maguire. Penguin: 1997; ISBN 0140242716; \$8.95.

The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-Free Play, by Neil A. Fiore. Tarcher: 1989; ISBN 0874775043; \$10.95

Overcoming Doubt, Fear and Procrastination: Identifying the Symptoms, Overcoming the Obstacles, by Barbara Wright Sykes. Collins: 1997; ISBN 0963285777; \$24.95.