

Procrastination 101

What Is Procrastination?

Who among us *hasn't* procrastinated? Sometimes it's no big deal, but other times we undermine ourselves or let others down when we put things off. Some people have a pattern of procrastination--they routinely blow things off or stress themselves and others out in a last-minute rush to hit a deadline. In this article we'll take a look at the *real* reasons we procrastinate. Understanding *why* we choose to put things off is the first step to breaking the procrastination habit.

Many of my coaching clients come to our first meeting with a list of goals that they've been putting off. When I ask why they've been procrastinating, I get a variety of answers:

- "I'm too busy."
- "I'll get to it eventually."
- "I don't know where to begin."
- "What if it doesn't work?"
- "I'm not sure if I should do it."
- And my personal favorite, "Let's see what happens."

In simple terms, procrastination is avoidance of a decision about what to do and what not to do. When we procrastinate, we operate in a gray zone, unclear and unresolved about what to focus on and when. It doesn't feel good and it undermines our clarity and self-confidence.

The Cycle of Procrastination

Procrastination often turns into a viscous cycle. We put off projects or decisions and over time they mount up. We become frustrated with the projects and with ourselves for not doing them. Our self-esteem suffers and we feel less and less motivated to do whatever we've been putting off. As things continue to mount up, we become overwhelmed and procrastinate more.

Peter, the Master Procrastinator

I've worked with many sales people who were masters of procrastination. At our first meeting, Peter told me his success depended on his making at least 120 sales prospecting calls a week. When I asked how many he was actually making, he said he didn't keep track. I had him keep a time log for a week. During the following workweek he made only 43 calls. During the time he could have been calling he spent 6 hours on the Internet, 7 hours on e-mail, 3 hours talking to people around the office, and ran 4 personal errands. Apparently, Peter was doing anything and everything to avoid making calls. He was sabotaging his own success. Why? Despite industry statistics that showed he'd have to make 35 calls to generate one sale, he felt anxious in anticipation of hearing a "no," so he avoided making calls. Through our work, Peter developed a new mindset and strategies and is now making close to 145 calls a week. His sales have increased 48% in three months.

"Just Do It" Just Doesn't Work

Most people think the cure for procrastination is simple: buckle down and work harder--"just do it!" Sometimes this strategy works temporarily, but eventually procrastination rears its ugly head again. "Just do it" doesn't address the real issue: *Why* we choose to procrastinate.

The Hidden Meaning of Procrastination

Very few people understand the real reason behind procrastination. Procrastination is a covert, unconscious strategy we use to avoid anxiety. Most of the time, it's not to avoid the work itself, but to avoid the anxiety that comes up when we contemplate starting or completing a project or making a decision. In other words, we get so antsy just thinking about a project that we push it aside. It's kind of like sweeping it under the carpet so we don't have to think about it.

So what's the anxiety about? It can be many things, but here are some of the most common:

- Fear of failure, criticism, being judged, or not doing it well enough. This fear can show up as a reluctance to say no to a project in anticipation of what others might think.
- Fear of success. If we succeed, we're afraid we'll be on the hook to do even more or perform at an even higher level.
- Not *yet* knowing what to do first or next in a project.
- Fear of making a wrong move or decision.
- Fear of losing our freedom or other opportunities once we commit to a project.

For most people, these fears are unconscious. The good news is that these fears are most often unfounded and irrational. When we flush them out and examine them, we can see how we are working against ourselves and decide to move on. That may mean taking immediate action or scheduling action. Sometimes the best way to stop procrastinating is to make a clear-cut decision *not* to do something.

When you find yourself putting something off, ask yourself what's the real reason you're avoiding it. Be honest with yourself. Are you procrastinating because of some fear or anxiety? If so, look at the anxiety and notice whether it's over something real or imagined. If you still feel stuck, take responsibility for moving ahead--schedule the next steps, take action, or work with a coach to help you accomplish what you really want.

All the best,
Coach Phil

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