

BUREAU OF STUDY COUNSEL
CENTER FOR ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Overcoming Procrastination

Procrastination refers to the avoidance of a specific task or work which needs to be accomplished. There are many reasons why people procrastinate. The challenge is to understand your reason so that you can take steps to address the cause of your procrastination difficulties. Many students cite the following reasons for avoiding work:

- Lack of relevance. If something is neither relevant nor meaningful to you personally, it may be difficult to get motivated even to begin.
- Acceptance of another's goals. If a project has been imposed or assigned to you and it is not consistent with your own interests, you may be reluctant to spend the necessary time to see it to conclusion.
- Perfectionism. Having unreachable standards will discourage you from pursuing a task. Remember, perfection is unattainable.
- Evaluation anxiety. Since others' responses to your work are not under your direct control, overvaluing these responses can create the kind of anxiety that will interfere with work getting accomplished.
- Ambiguity. If you are uncertain of what is expected of you, it may be difficult to get started.
- Fear of the unknown. If you are venturing into a new realm or field, you don't have any way of knowing how well you'll do. Such an uncertain outcome may inhibit your desire to begin.
- Inability to handle the task. If through lack of training, skills, or ability you feel that you lack the personal resources to do the job, you may avoid it completely.

The next step in overcoming procrastination is to clearly specify how *you* procrastinate. Consider the following examples.

1. Do you act as though if you ignore a task, it will go away? The midterm exam in your chemistry course is not likely to vaporize, no matter how much you ignore it.
2. Do you underestimate the work involved in the task, or overestimate your abilities and resources in relationship to the task? Do you tell yourself that you grasp concepts so easily that you need only spend one hour on the physics problems which would normally take six?
3. Do you deceive yourself by substituting one worthy activity for another? Suppose you clean your room instead of writing your paper. Valuing a clean room is fine but if that value only becomes important when there is a paper due, you are procrastinating.
4. Do you believe that repeated "minor" delays are harmless? An example is putting off writing your paper so you can surf the internet for five minutes. If you don't

- return to writing the paper after the five minutes have elapsed, you may end up chatting on-line and exploring the web all night, with no work being done on the paper.
5. Do you dramatize a commitment to a task rather than actually doing it? An example is taking your books on vacation but never opening them, or declining an invitation to go out with friends but still not pursuing the work at hand nor getting needed relaxation. This way you stay in a constant state of unproductive readiness to work – without ever working.
 6. Do you persevere on only one portion of the task? An example is writing and rewriting the introductory paragraph of the paper but not dealing with the body and the conclusion. The intro is important, but not at the expense of the entire project.
 7. Do you become paralyzed in deciding between alternative choices? An example involves spending so much time deciding between two paper topics that you don't have sufficient time to write the paper.

What can you *do* about procrastination? If you can visualize yourself in one or more of the above vignettes, you may be ready to overcome your problems with avoidance or procrastination. The following is a list of additional steps which may help you to deal with your avoidance:

- Extract from the above examples those principles which apply to you. Write them down.
- Make honest decisions about your work. If you wish to spend only a minimal amount of effort or time on a particular task, admit it – do not allow guilt feelings to interfere with your realization of this fact. Weight the consequences of various amounts of investment in a project and find the optimal return for your investment. This step exposes intentional reasons for avoiding work. If you have been unintentionally avoiding work, admit to yourself that you *do* want to achieve certain goals and accept the responsibilities involved in meeting those goals.
- Work to acquire an adequate understanding of what is necessary to accomplish a task within a given time frame. Devote only that amount of time which is appropriate for each part of a task.
- Divide larger, more complex tasks into smaller steps. Divide the small steps reasonably (allowing sufficient time for each step) within the given time frame.
- Give yourself breaks and rewards. Intersperse rewards, relaxation, and gratification for work completed. This will help you feel less resentful of the task and the work that still needs to be done.
- Monitor your progress on the small steps. Watch for the pitfalls discussed above and when problems arise do something about them quickly. This may include scheduling a time to speak with a BSC counselor.
- Be reasonable in your expectations of yourself. Perfectionistic or extremely strict expectations may cause you to procrastinate further and may sabotage your progress.

You may be interested in exploring this topic further with a BSC counselor. To schedule an appointment, you can speak with a Front Office staff member in person or contact the Front Office at (617) 495-2581.