

Why Do We Procrastinate?

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Abstract

Procrastination is defined as the voluntary postponement of important tasks while being aware of the negative consequences. This phenomenon is found to be very common in undergraduate students with over 70% claiming to be frequent procrastinators. The origin of procrastination can vary from person to person, however in general this behavior is the result of many biological and psychological factors. Thankfully, through specific training methods we can adjust our behavior and increase our behavior.

Procrastination is to put off something intentionally and habitually. In most contexts people procrastinate on work tasks, school tasks, home chores or any other work that people find difficult/ inconvenient. Procrastination has a negative connotation as it implies that someone is too lazy to complete a task and they deliberately push away from doing the task in favor of something less important. Procrastination affects the majority of the global adult population to some degree with the main demographic being college students and young adults. According to an article titled "The Nature of Procrastination", approximately 80-90 percent of college students procrastinate regularly with 50 percent admitting that habitual procrastination negatively impacts their academics. (Steel, 2007). Habitual procrastination in students can not only lead to poor academic performance but can lead to many mental and physical problems such as self-induced stress, low self-esteem, weight gain any many other negative side effects caused by the loss of time due to procrastination. Because of its harmful nature, it would make sense for students to avoid this behavior; however, there are many inherent biological and psychological factors that leave some students to be more or less likely to procrastinate (Klassen et. al., 2008).

A college student deliberately not doing their homework or studying in favor of hanging out with friends for a single night is not very problematic. The issue that many students have is a consistent inability to do tasks in a timely and organized manner, leading to assignments and other work to be done last minute and result in lower quality. This may be attributed to many things such as social media, social events, decreasing attention span, etc. all of which are due to short term distractions and can be easily remedied (Klassen et. al., 2008). However, there are also other phenomena such as the procrastination paradox that can cause habitual procrastination (Whitbourne, 2012). Susan Whitbourne, a PhD professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst explains the phenomena in her article "The Paradox of Procrastination". The overall concept of the paper is that when faced with a daunting task such as studying for a difficult exam, students will be dismayed from studying because of the high difficulty. Because they don't want to study, they are likely to procrastinate, the procrastination leads to last minute exam preparation and thus a poor exam grade. Because of the poor grades, students will believe that they are unable to do well in their class which then makes studying for the next exam even harder and thus leads

to chronic procrastination. This constant cycle can result in more than just wasted time, overtime poor academic performance and lack of confidence and motivation can lead to decline in mental health because of self-induced stress. High stress levels can then make many other aspects of a student's life more difficult. For example, high stress can lead to many physical complications such as heart disease, obesity and other unwanted physical effects on students (Witbourne, 2012).

Because of the very negative effects that procrastination has on students it would make sense to avoid it all costs. Initially it would seem that the cause for procrastination would be completely psychological, with behavioral factors like motivation and self-regulation being the only explanation (Harris, 2019). However, there are physical predispositions in the brain that cause some students to be more likely to procrastinate than others (Jaffe, 2013). The biggest physical culprit for chronic procrastination is the interaction between the limbic system and prefrontal cortex in our brain. The limbic system and prefrontal cortex are two regions of our brain assigned to regulate completely opposite functions. The limbic system is the part of our brain associated with emotion and other more primitive functions such as eating, pleasure/reward system, reproducing and controlling of chemicals such as dopamine and serotonin. The prefrontal cortex is associated with controlling more intelligent functions such as reasoning and logic. In the context of procrastination, the limbic system leans toward seeking short term pleasure and the prefrontal cortex is more rational and leans toward getting tasks done early to reduce stress. Because all students are unique it is possible for some students to have a stronger acting prefrontal cortex that allows them to better act off rational decisions and make them less likely to habitually procrastinate. On the opposite side there are also students that have a stronger limbic system making their emotional/ thrill seeking side stronger than their rational decision-making side, thus leading to students that are more likely to procrastinate regardless of psychological aspects such as willpower or motivation.

Although there are physical predispositions that make some students more susceptible to procrastinating, the main reasons behind procrastination are psychological. Some factors that affect how well a student performs are self-regulation and self-esteem. A study done by Robert M. Klassen in the journal "Contemporary Ducational Psychology," Klassen takes many psychological factors



such as self-regulation, academic self-efficacy and self-esteem and surveys students to see if factors that affect procrastination rates also affect GPA (Klassen, 2008). In the experiments 261 students were surveyed to rate how well they were able to self-regulate, their self-esteem, their academic self-efficacy (the definition of self-efficacy being one's belief in themselves to succeed), and how often they procrastinate on a numeric scale.

The values that the students gave were then compared to the student's GPA. The results of this experiment show that when students that were unable to self-regulate their time, they struggled with procrastination and had lower GPA's than students that identified as having good self-regulation of time. The demographics that had the most trouble with procrastination and had the lowest academic performance were those that lacked self-esteem and self-efficacy (Klassen, 2008). This shows that in some students procrastination has less to do with time management and laziness but more to do with their lack of self confidence in the ability to do a difficult task, making them less likely to want to do it and thus increasing their procrastination rates and decreasing their academic performance.

Now that we know procrastination is due to more than just laziness and distractions, we can begin to add more strategies for how to prevent procrastination (Chrishildrew, 2015). The first common strategy is to remove all potential distractions such as phones or friends from your workspace. Other strategies include properly managing time and creating a self-rewarding system to incentivize yourself to complete tasks. Although these tips help with the self-regulation previously mentioned, they don't address the self-esteem or self-efficacy that cause habitual procrastination. Syeda Batool, a researcher from Govt. College University in Lahore, also conducted research highlighting the correlation between self-esteem and educational performance. In her research paper "Academic Procrastination as a product of low self-esteem: A mediational role of academic self-efficacy" she comes to a similar conclusion, saying that "Procrastination serves as an ego protecting mechanism, which is used as a defensive device by people with low self-esteem." (Batool, et. al., 2017). From her research she also concludes that self-esteem and self-efficacy are positively correlated, and self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of procrastination. She suggests that increased self-esteem will result in a decrease of procrastination habits.

This means that the most effective way to reduce procrastination habits is to participate in academic activities that boost one's self-esteem. This now raises the question of what effective strategies that improve one's self-esteem and confidence in academic ability. Michelle Harris, author of "The Link Between Self-Esteem and Social Relationships: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies" says "The meta-analytic finding that social relationships have a prospective effect on self-esteem provides support for central theories in the field of self-esteem, such as sociometer theory, reflected appraisals theory, and attachment theory." As outlined in the introduction, all of these theories highlight the key role of positive social relationships, social support, and social acceptance in shaping the development of self-esteem in all

phases of the human life span." (Harris, 2019).". In this quote Harris talks about her experiment comparing self-esteem with social relationships, the important part being that she concludes positive social experiences are an important part in developing one's self-esteem. For a student these social interactions would be going to office hours, seeking study groups, and opening up to friends about academic stress. These strategies at face value may not seem to prevent procrastination, but talking to others and hearing about their difficulties and getting reassurance from others can help make stressful classes seem less daunting and easier to work on, these strategies are all effective in helping students study whilst also developing their social relationships, which further develop their self-esteem, lowering procrastination and increasing academic success and a false sense of hopelessness that lead students to avoid doing certain tasks and spiraling into a chronic problem of one's perception of what they are capable of doing rather than just being too lazy to study.

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