

Procrastination has got to be one of the worst afflictions student face. Most people procrastinate sometimes; some of us procrastinate most of the time. Many students can get away with it, getting 'good enough' grades, maybe even A's or B's on papers (projects) done at the eleventh hour, with little or no revision. Few would argue however that this represents the best that they are capable of. For some, this 'getting away with it' provides kind of a rebellious high that maintains this behavior. Maybe it's a dysfunctional hedge against our fear of failure. If the grade is poor or mediocre..well what did you expect?, ..you knocked that paper out the night before it was due. If you had really put some work into it then a poor grade might mean that you don't have what it takes. It's like subconsciously we assume that if we don't really try we won't really fail. In reality not trying produces the ultimate failure, you won't learn much. Mostly though it's just plain avoidance, putting off doing something that we find unpleasant or threatening. You know you'll eventually get it done. The mystery in all this for me is why procrastination is so persistent. From what I've observed people generally don't really have lots of fun while procrastinating. In fact often they'll engage in some kind of activity that is justifiable and assuages the guilt that they feel over not doing what they should be doing. Some of my favorite examples of this I've heard over the years are students who say they can't begin to write that paper or study for finals until they've cleaned their apartment. This might make some sense, you can probably work more efficiently in a clean, organized environment, and if this is some kind of ritual that helps you get started, go for it. But let's set some priorities, if you've got ten pages to write in the next eight hours, can you really afford to spend an hour or two cleaning? The absolute best example of this kind of avoidance is deciding that you need to look up a few more articles before you begin writing, when you've got more material already than you can probably use. Remember the assignment is to write a paper not to read one (or twenty)! Use the material you've got and spend a little more time analyzing, digesting and writing.

In the overall battle against procrastination it's important to know the enemy, what are the ways that you avoid and procrastinate? Learn to recognize them and start to vanquish them. It might motivate us is this battle to recognize the huge hidden cost of a pattern of chronic avoidance. Chronic avoidance erodes our self-confidence. Think about it, when you avoid something the message you're telling yourself is that you can't handle it. It's the **only** message you're giving, you're not even giving yourself the opportunity to see what you can achieve by confronting the issue. Avoidance leads to zero growth, zero learning. If you confront things you will learn and grow. You might not always reach your highest goal, but you will certainly learn something along the way. Attitude can be vital here. Learn to view tasks and problems as challenges, rather than threats. Most things can be defined either way. The

definition we choose can make a world of difference. When you think of challenge you think of the gains or the value of undertaking the task. Challenges are why people sail around the world in little boats, climb mountains and jump out of perfectly good airplanes. These people aren't stupid, they know there are risks and they take appropriate precautions, but they are focused on the gains for them of undertaking the experience. They engage fully in the experience and bring forth their best effort. When you define something as a threat you focus on the potential losses,.. loss of life, of prestige, money etc. It makes sense that you want to avoid these things and so you don't engage and don't bring forth your best effort. So view what you do as a challenge, focus on what you will learn from it.

So the reality of procrastination is that we're not having fun, in fact it can make us feel quite miserable, disrupting sleep, spoiling our appetite and causing us to be tense and worried. And we're not getting our work done. It's the worst of both worlds. We offer few guarantees in the mental health business but here's one that you can take to the bank. Stop procrastinating and get working and you will feel better. You've been telling yourself that the work will be unpleasant so it makes sense to avoid it. But you know you can't avoid it forever and right now avoiding the work (procrastinating) is making you feel worse, doing the work will make you feel better. So how do you get started? That first step, breaking the ice, is critical. Put aside all distractions (cell phones, TV's, etc) and get to your desk and start writing. Get your fingers moving on that keyboard, even if you have to start by just typing your name or the topic of the paper for half a page or so, break the ice get something written. Once you've started, keep writing. Turn off that internal editor, it doesn't have to be perfect, in fact it never will be, so get out of your own way, stop criticizing and write. If you get really stuck, it might be helpful to step away from it for awhile. Move, go out and walk or throw the ball with your dog. Don't turn on the T.V., start surfing the net, or checking email, in fact don't do anything that involves a screen, these can suck up way too much time. Keep your break brief, and then get back to it. Remind yourself of how good it will feel to get this done, think about what you're learning along the way.

Don't focus on the whole, huge project but break it down into smaller tasks. Most big projects can be broken down into smaller tasks that require different kinds of skills, there might be data analysis, reading for background, synthesizing or analyzing. If you're not clear where to begin just begin with what seems the most accessible or doable and get doing. Don't stop yourself by saying that you need a big block of time to get anywhere with this project. Challenge yourself to see how much work you can get done if you only have an hour free at the moment. You'd be surprised what you can accomplish.