

The jury is in! Procrastination, like much of everything else in life, is best done in moderation. Those who procrastinate too long, of course, are likely to fail. Pre-crastinators (those who get everything done well in advance) do fine, but they are not the people who are the most successful. It turns out that the people who are the most successful procrastinate in a way that is efficient and inspires creativity.

Planned procrastination is designed for those who are successful procrastinators but have worry, guilt, or both about their habit. If you believe that the benefits of your procrastination outweigh the cons, use the worksheet on the next page.

If you procrastinate and it often fails you, the Planned Procrastination Worksheet is not for you. Whether you have difficulty getting motivated for dull and boring tasks due to inertia or whether it is because you're overwhelmed and just can't get started on your long to-do list or huge project, you probably tell yourself that you should do it. But you really don't want to do it. Thinking about why you do want to complete a task can be helpful. Therefore, the Find the Want worksheet on p. 40 is useful.

Moreover, the key to overcoming problematic procrastination is to commit to small, easily accomplished pieces. It's helpful to remember the adage "inch by inch it's a cinch; yard by yard it's hard." You can apply this premise in two general ways. The first is to divide big projects into subtasks. The second way is to commit to a reasonable, specific amount of time to work on your project each day, a few times a week, or even once a week.

An example that many of you can relate to is a messy house. If every room in your house is a mess, it is likely to feel overwhelming to think of cleaning it. You look around and lose any motivation you may have had because it is so overwhelming and it seems that any efforts would barely make a dent. The result: You give up.

In this case, it helps to start by picking one room that you feel would provide the greatest stress relief if it could be clean. Let's say it's the kitchen. That still might feel like an overwhelming task, but not nearly as daunting as cleaning your whole place. The next step is to pick one kitchen task that would be easy to accomplish, preferably something that would take less than 15 minutes. For instance, you could commit to throwing away all the trash. Or you may decide to put away everything on the countertops and tables. If you have a fair amount of motivation, you may decide to do both.

At this point, one of two things will happen. One possibility is that you will feel unmotivated to do anything else. If this is the case, at least celebrate your small but important feat. You finally got started! Make a commitment to do the next task the next day, or, if today is a weekend or day off, you might even commit to doing it later in the day.

Planned Procrastination for Successful Procrastinators

What are you currently procrastinating about?

Based on your history, when do you think you will start this task? Be realistic.

Take out your calendar and write down the date and time you think you will likely start this project. If in doubt, choose the earliest you would realistically start based on past behavior.

If you worry in between, remind yourself that procrastination always works for you and postpone your worry to the date you have put in your calendar. Alternatively, begin the "Inch by Inch" worksheet later in this chapter.

Feeling guilty? Make a list of people to whom you would like to explain why you are going to continue to procrastinate.

Ask for their support. Preferably discuss this in person. Here is an example of a script.

I know my procrastination makes you uncomfortable, but procrastination has always worked very well for me. I've done well in school and in my jobs. When I start things early, I spend more time dawdling and distracted. Once I start working, I'm very efficient and more creative. The worst thing is that I occasionally don't get enough sleep. But that's worth it to me. I know you do things differently, but the way that I do things really works for me. I've even read recently that moderate procrastinators are actually the most successful people. So I'm hoping I can get your support and that you can view my procrastination as being different, instead of viewing it as wrong.

If you cannot talk to the person (e.g., if they are deceased, but you still "hear their voice" in your head) or there is a reason you don't want to talk to them, you can write them a letter you don't send or pretend they are sitting in an empty chair and say something similar. You could write an email, but remember that email exchanges on sensitive topics risk being misunderstood. If the person is not accepting and continues to judge you, consider letting them be responsible for their anxiety or frustration. You can also use the broken-record strategy to let them know you are firm in your habits. For example, any time they judge you, repeatedly reply, "Procrastination works for me." Soon they will likely tire of your response and stop.

The other thing that might happen is that by accomplishing this task you feel energized. You might think, “It would be pretty easy to clean off the countertops and they’ll look so much better.” In just a few minutes, you have clean countertops. You might stop at this point and be proud of your accomplishment. Then again, you might think, “I may as well load the dishes in the sink into the dishwasher” or “I may as well do the dishes.” If you get this far, the only thing left would be the floor, and that would be an easy task for the next day. Or, if you have time and energy, you might just find yourself finishing the job.

An alternative to choosing a small task is to spend a certain amount of time a project. Depending on your motivation level and the type of task, you might commit to only 10 minutes, or you might commit to a couple of hours. Much like the subtasks, you might spend 15 minutes cleaning your kitchen, for example, and then decide that you are on a roll and want to continue. At this point, you could set a goal for an additional 10–15 minutes or you could just continue at will. Setting a timer may help you to focus your attention on the tasks at hand. Do your best not to be distracted by your phone, by reading junk mail, or by other things that would take your attention off the task. Be fast and focused, but not rushed. Think of it as a game to see how much you can accomplish while being mindful and keeping your body relatively relaxed.

Whether you choose small tasks or small chunks of time may vary depending upon the task. The chunk of time will certainly vary depending upon the task. For example, choosing 15 minutes when you’re painting a room or mowing a lawn doesn’t make sense. If you like the work, a larger time period will be more effective than if the task is something you really don’t want to do.

A third option is to combine the above strategies. Set a small goal and give yourself a time limit to accomplish that goal. Think of it as a deadline. Consider how much you would typically be able to accomplish in those final moments, after you stop procrastinating and finally get started. For instance, say you are writing a term paper. Commit to writing a draft that is at least three double-spaced pages in an hour. Write down the time that you plan to finish this task and don’t do anything that you’d avoid doing if you were down to the final deadline. The idea is to mimic the focus you get after you finally get started when a real deadline is looming. When you’ve finished, reward yourself, even if it is just taking a 10–15 minute break. In the following worksheet, try to choose a task that you have plenty of time to finish. Or, if you have already been procrastinating, it’s okay to use it now, but when you finish it remember to use it to prevent yourself from procrastinating in the future.

Another strategy to combat procrastination is preparation. If you have been avoiding a task, set out the necessary equipment and any required clothing ahead of time. For instance, in the case of the aforementioned kitchen, let’s say that you had done almost everything, but had run out of time or energy to do the floor. It would take you about a minute to get out the broom, dustpan, bucket, mop, and soap. Then, the next day, it will be easier to keep on task.

Time yourself on tasks you tend to avoid because you don’t like them. You will probably realize that you overreact to the gravity of the task. For instance, most people are surprised by how little time it takes to unload the dishwasher or put away a basket of folded laundry if they’re focused. Timing tasks can help to prevent dawdling as well. In fact, you can look at this as a game. I’m going to try to put away the clothes in less than five minutes...go!

Is there a small task that you have been avoiding? Has it been hanging over your head for days, weeks, even months? Maybe it’s a phone call to schedule an appointment? Maybe you’re avoiding putting the clothes away from your laundry basket or changing the furnace filter you bought two weeks ago. If you have a few minutes, don’t delay! Do it right now. Or, if it’s something you can’t do now, write in your planner to do it later today or tomorrow. If you have several little things like this hanging over your head, do one a day until they are all finished. Because life is full of these small tasks that we tend to postpone, some people find it helpful to set a regular time in their schedule to do just one of them. For instance, you might choose to do one small task before you eat lunch or just after you finish or return from lunch.

Inch by Inch

What is the most important task you want to avoid procrastinating about?

Which strategy do you like most for this task: dividing it into small tasks, choosing a chunk of time, or both?

When do you want to complete the larger task?

How many days do you have to complete this task?

Look at your calendar and see what other commitments you have. Schedule an amount of time for each day or many of the remaining days, or divide the task into subtasks and enter time amounts or subtasks into your calendar.

