



COLORADO LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Learn to Procrastinate Effectively

“If it weren’t for the last minute, nothing would get done.” ~ Rita Mae Brown

What do you think when you hear the term “procrastinate?” It’s probably not a positive association. Procrastination occurs when we delay or postpone action. In our fast paced, economically driven society, our worth is often based on how much we can produce, so postponing action is not considered an admirable trait. People who procrastinate are seen as lazy and not working as hard as everyone else. In addition, for lawyers, procrastination can lead to missed deadlines and client harm. However, all people procrastinate. There are times when delaying action is necessary and even helpful in completing tasks. The trick is to know how and when to delay the completion of certain tasks, and how to do it effectively.

Studies almost exclusively portray procrastination as a pathology. According to research, those who procrastinate: have low self-esteem; are perfectionists; have obsessive-compulsive disorder; suffer anxiety and depression; or have neurological disorders. For example, perfectionists and individuals with low self-esteem procrastinate because they fear the task will not be completed the “right” way, or will not be good enough, and they fear the potential for criticism, shame, and guilt if someone judges it negatively. Individuals who suffer from anxiety, depression, or attention deficit disorder might see a to-do list that is so long it seems unmanageable. Rather than getting started on a task, they freeze “like a deer in the headlights,” or, sometimes procrastination is simply daydreaming about the things we would rather be doing, or surfing the internet mindlessly for hours. We are unable to get back to the task at hand. Poor time management can be a big factor in creating procrastination. Instead of prioritizing, we lump tasks that are more urgent in with the tasks that aren’t as urgent. Another category of individuals who procrastinate do so because they need the adrenaline and euphoric rush that comes from waiting until the last minute to get something finished.

Procrastination can also relate to issues with impulsiveness, reactivity, and lack of affect (emotional) regulation. If we operate like a cork in the ocean, constantly being swayed by our emotions and moods, or the people and external stimuli around us, it is difficult to focus on a single task in front of us. Because our attention spans are limited to begin with, this becomes an issue in the battle against procrastination. Every person’s attention span is limited. We can only pay attention to something for so long. Depending on the study, that can be from seconds to minutes. In addition, our attention spans are getting shorter in the technological age, so procrastination is becoming a bigger problem. As Einstein wisely noted, we can’t solve problems from the level of consciousness that created them. To solve a

problem, or complete a task, sometimes we have to change our perspective about it and deal with what is known as cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance, or mental stress, occurs when our thoughts and actions are not aligned. If our behaviors don't align with the expectations we set for ourselves, the mental discomfort and inconsistency cause psychological distress. For example, if we aren't doing what we feel we "should," we reframe our belief system around the situation (rationalize why we aren't doing it, feel guilty, etc.) and the brain literally suffers. As a by-product, we procrastinate. The more the project is resisted, the harder it will become to complete.

Changing our perspective about the tasks we need to complete is one way to avoid procrastination. Another is to procrastinate effectively. If the weekend is approaching, and you have several projects for both work and home that need to get done, make a master to-do-list. Prioritize the list in terms of urgency and then rate the items based on desire and motivation to do them. Start with the task that is the most urgent, and work on that for an hour. Take a break for 15 to 30 minutes and work on a task that isn't as urgent on your list but that you have more interest and motivation to accomplish. Part of procrastinating effectively is managing time efficiently. If you find yourself drawn to the TV or to the internet to "rest" from a task, consider taking a walk or exercising instead. When we accomplish tasks on our to-do list, the endorphins and positive chemicals of emotions that are produced help us have the motivation to continue and complete the tasks that we weren't so motivated to do earlier. Watching TV or mindlessly surfing the internet (particularly engaging in social media) cause the body to produce chemicals that inhibit our ability to get "back on track" with the tasks at hand. Therefore, it's best to hold off on those until you are ready to completely relax at the end of the day.

Another way to procrastinate effectively is to break up the tasks into smaller parts, and spend shorter amounts of time chipping away at the task if it seems overwhelming. Finally, get in the habit of doing tasks as soon as you think of them. It takes more energy to put off a task, or to develop a rationalization to avoid it, than it does to simply buckle down and get started. When you are driving home from work and notice that you need to fill the gas tank, do it. Rather than assuming there will be time tomorrow before you go to work, get the task done immediately. Chances are, if you are a procrastinator or simply have a never-ending to-do list, the time will not be there tomorrow as you assume it will. Getting into the practice of completing tasks immediately, such as cleaning the dishes after you finish a meal rather than leaving them for later, will help you develop the momentum to get through your to-do list.

Procrastination occurs for many reasons, and to counter the impulse to put something off until later, we need to examine our unique style of completing tasks. The key is find a

way to use your strengths to be efficient and effective with your time. When we are procrastinating, we often spend quite a bit of time worrying about the task we are not completing, and that time can be much better spent on other tasks. It's also important to remember that we are not machines, and we need to rest completely at times. Only you know how much "down time" you need in order to be your best at work, and in your life in general. If you need two hours a night reading a good book, be sure to organize your time during the day to accommodate that. If you need a solid eight hours of sleep to be at your best, keep to that schedule. We hear people say things like "there aren't enough hours in a day" all the time. However, if we learn to use our time efficiently and have the discipline to stick to routines that are ultimately in our own best interest, there is actually plenty of time to get done what is important. It is usually when we are stressed that our schedules become overwhelming, we procrastinate, and we end up sabotaging important aspects of our personal and professional lives. Time management is an important part of self-care that can actually prevent us from getting stressed out, so start working on this skill today!

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