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# Procrastinating Effectively

*“If it Weren’t for the Last Minute,  
Nothing Would Ever Get Done”*

*~Rita Mae Brown*

BY SARAH MYERS ESQ., LMFT, LAC



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**W**hat 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 society, and certainly in the practice of law, “time is money,” so our worth is often based on how productive we are in a day. Postponing action is therefore not often considered an admirable trait. In extreme cases, it can certainly lead to missed deadlines and even client harm. However, everyone procrastinates at some point because there are times when delaying action is necessary

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and even helpful in completing tasks. The trick is to know how and when to delay the completion of certain tasks effectively.

### **Studies almost exclusively portray procrastination as a pathology.**

According to research, those who procrastinate often share traits that may include low self-esteem, perfectionism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety and depression, and/or have neurological disorders. For example, those of us who are perfectionists or suffer from low self-esteem procrastinate because we fear our final product might be judged negatively. Those of us who suffer from anxiety, depression, or attention deficit disorder might view our to-do list as being unmanageable. Rather than getting started on a task, we freeze “like a deer in the headlights,” daydream about the things we would rather be doing, and/or surf the internet mindlessly and are unable to get back to the task at hand. We might also have difficulty prioritizing, and lump tasks that are more urgent in with the tasks that aren’t as urgent. Lastly, some of us chronically procrastinate because we have become addicted to the adrenaline rush that comes from waiting until the last minute to get something finished, and we trick ourselves into believing that we perform “better under pressure.”

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 by the people, news, texts, emails, social media, and other external stimuli around us, it is difficult to focus on a single task in front of us. With so many distractions, changing our perspective about the tasks we need to complete is one way to avoid procrastination. Another is to procrastinate effectively, which might entail:



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1. **Managing time 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.
  2. **Navigate the distractions:** If you find yourself drawn to digital distractions, consider taking a walk, play with your pet, cleaning the bathroom, calling a good friend or exercising instead. 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.
  3. **Break-up tasks:** Divide the task into smaller parts and spend shorter amounts of time chipping away at the larger
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task if it seems overwhelming. When we accomplish even small parts of the 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.

4. **Balance lists with action:** When you think of a task that you can't do in the moment, write it down. Trying to remember all the things you are supposed to do is distracting. However, when you can accomplish a task in the moment, do that rather than assuming you'll have time to get to it tomorrow. 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 finding 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 to spend 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, there is plenty of time to get done what is important. But when we are stressed, our schedules seem more overwhelming than they are, and we both procrastinate and sabotage important aspects of our personal and professional lives. Time management is an important part of self-care that can prevent the very stress that inevitably takes us off course, so the more you develop these skills, the more you will be able to procrastinate effectively. ●

Sarah Myers, Esq., LMFT, LAC, is the Executive Director of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to [www.coloradolap.org](http://www.coloradolap.org). For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or [info@coloradolap.org](mailto:info@coloradolap.org).