

The Now Habit

by Neil Fiore, Ph.D.

Summary by Xavier Noria
fxn@hashref.com

Why We Procrastinate

Anxiety

- Most of us who consider ourselves procrastinators meet deadlines and avoid serious penalties
- Our distress comes from the constant *anxiety* of delaying, guilt about the inferior quality of projects completed at the last minute, and deep regrets about life's missed opportunities

A Positive View

- The Now Habit does not accept that laziness, disorganization, or any other character defect is the reason you procrastinate
- Procrastination is *not* a character defect, rather, it is an attempt at coping with the often incapacitating fear of having our worth held up for judgement

Fears

- It is the *fear of failure*, the *fear of being imperfect*, and the *fear of impossible expectations* that prevent us from acting
- The *fear of judgement* is the key fear that stems from over-identifying who you are, your worth as a person, with your work

A Learned Defence

- Procrastination is a learned protective reaction to pressure, feeling overwhelmed, and fear of failure and of success
- If these underlying fears are allayed, the learned tactic of procrastination can rapidly be unlearned

Rewards

- Procrastination is rewarding
- It lessens your fear from being judged
- It temporarily reduces anxiety
- Occasionally the task is finally done by someone else
- Often goes unpunished

How We Procrastinate

Walking A Board

- We use a metaphor to understand how we learned to procrastinate
- **A.** Walking a board on the ground
- **B.** Walking a board suspended between buildings 100 feet above the pavement
- **C.** Walking a board suspended between buildings 100 feet above the pavement, with the building on your end on fire

The Board

- On a psychological level you are often the one who raises the board off the ground by changing a straightforward task into the rest of your worth, proof that you are acceptable, a prediction that you will be successful and happy or a failure and miserable

- Through *perfectionism* you raise the task 100 feet above the ground, so that any failure or rejection would be intolerable
- You demand that you do it perfectly, without anxiety, with complete acceptance from your audience, with no criticism

- In most cases you are the one who confuses just *doing the job* with *testing your worth*, where one possible mistake would feel like the end of the world
- When you believe that your self-worth is determined by your performance, you focus on psychological self-protection from fear of failing, rather than just doing the job

- When you procrastinate, it's as if you are the one raising the board off the ground, getting yourself frozen, and then lighting that fire to create the pressure of a real deadline
- Procrastination allows us to resist being judged by our production because we never make a complete effort that reflects our full ability

Bouncing From Failures

- Successful people suffer through catastrophes and bankruptcies. The successful person fails many times and bounces back
- The failure fails only once, letting that one failure become a judgement of his worth, and thus his label

- You could fall many times, repeatedly using your net bounce back in order to work for another success
- No book can teach self-worth. It can only show you how to act as if you have self-worth
- You'll start by replacing procrastination patterns with the positive habits of a producer

- As you become more effective in controlling your work habits and guaranteeing your leisure time you'll be building self-esteem
- But it will *not* be true self-worth until you can talk to yourself in positive language that heals the self-alienation you've learned over the years

- Luckily, you don't need to be perfectly psychoanalyzed, nor do you need to totally love yourself to benefit from replacing your threatening inner dialogue with nurturing an effective self-talk
- You will make significant progress in your ability to work with concentration, serenity, and creativity by creating safety and compassion for you human imperfection

How to Talk to Yourself

Language

- We focus on the use of language, since language reflects attitudes and beliefs that determine how you act and feel
- Pressure messages generate anxiety and create negative reactions
- In addition to being counterproductive, such messages fail to point out the direction toward what you *want, decide, or choose* to do

- By learning to challenge and replace your negative internal dialogue, you will free yourself from attitudes about your worth and abilities that are inappropriate for your current age, intellect, and power

“Have To’s” – Stress

- “Have to’s” communicate victimhood, resistance, burden, stress, confusion
- Your brain must simultaneously tackle two conflicting situations: providing the energy for the imposed task, and providing the energy to resist threats to the integrity of the self, with either the stress or depressive response

- With the confusion of the “have to” message, you’re stuck, physically, and emotionally
- Attempting to resolve being stuck by adding pressure through discipline or specters of terrible catastrophes will only make matters worse
- These things only confirm the impression that the task is awful and painful

"Should's" – Depression

- Should compares *ideal vs. bad reality*
- Counterproductive goal compares *finished vs. bad start*
- Envy compares *admired vs. bad you*
- Longing for the future compares *bliss vs. bad now*

- As you begin to speak to yourself in a language that focuses on *results* rather than *blame*, on *choice* rather than *have to*, on what *is* rather than what you think *should be*, you will find that your body and mind cooperate by providing a level of *positive energy*, without stress or anxiety, free from unnecessary struggles of the past and negative comparisons with the future

- You don't have to *want* to do the task, nor do you have to love it. But if you prefer it to the consequences of not doing it, you can decide to *commit* to it wholeheartedly

Positive Language

- *I am going* to the store
- *I will be* at the dentist at 3:00 PM
- *I am going* to traffic court this morning

Saying "No"

- Developing fresh alternative self-statements that involve *choice*, *commitment*, and the *ability to say no* is an essential step towards having a greater range of possibilities in working on any task and in changing from a procrastinator to an effective producer

- No, I'll need time to think about that
- No, I would rather have a contract with terms I know I can wholeheartedly embrace than endanger the quality of my work by compromising
- No, I will not be paying that bill now, and I'm willing to pay for the privilege by incurring your interest charges

Five Self-Statements

Negative Attitudes

- There are five essential negative attitudes or self-statements that lead to procrastination and distinguish procrastinators from producers
- Every procrastinator normally presents *some* of these symptoms

I Have to

- Replace “I have to” by “**I choose to**” in your inner dialogue

I Must Finish

- “Finishing” is in the vague distance, a long way from where you may be now in terms of skills, confidence, and perspective
- Replace “I must finish” with “**When can I start?**”
- This focuses energy on what can be tackled now

This Is So Big

- The bigger and more overwhelming the project seems to you, the greater your tendency to procrastinate. Anxiety will replace the natural tendency toward motivation and curiosity
- Replace “This is so big” with “**I can take one small step**”
- A project, as a book, can’t be done all at once, it is a sequence of small steps

I Must Be Perfect

- The more perfectionist and self-critical you are, the harder it is to start on a project that you already know will never be quite good enough
- Replace “I must be perfect” with “**I can be human**”
- Add *acceptance of* (not *resignation to*) your human limits

I Don't Have Time To Play

- Replace “I don't have time to play” with **“I must take time to play”**
- Insisting on your regular time for exercise, for dinners with friends, for frequent vacations throughout the year increases the feelings of inner worth and respect for yourself

All Together

- Procrastinator: “I have to finish something big and do it perfectly while working hard for long periods of time without time to play”
- Producer: “I choose to start on one small imperfect step knowing I have plenty of time for play”

Progressive

- You won't change these negative thoughts at once, it will take time
- You'll be more alert of them and will progressively switch
- Each time you choose to switch you are writing a new track of brain cells, a new neural pathway in your brain

Guilt-Free Play, Quality Work

Putting Off Living

- “Putting off living” is the most tragic form of procrastination we can engage in. Not only does it keep us from completing the really important tasks in life, it lessens our respect for ourselves
- We need guilt-free play to provide us with periods of physical and mental renewal

Peak Performers

- Peak performers surpass workaholics in taking more vacations, being healthier, and accomplishing more of the tasks that make a real difference

Energy

- A firm commitment to guilt-free play will recharge your batteries, creating renewed motivation, creativity, and energy for all the other areas of your life

Motivation

- Guilt-Free play gives **quality work**

Overcoming Blocks to Action

Three Major Blocks

- Fear of being overwhelmed
- Fear of failure
- Fear of finishing

Now Habit Tools

- Three-dimensional thinking
- Work of worrying
- Persistent starting

Three-Dimensional Thinking

- Tackling any large project requires an overview of its *size, length, and breadth*
- The *reverse calendar* starts with the ultimate deadline and then moves back, step by step, to the present where you can focus your energy on starting
- *You* control the deadlines, there's no just a big imposed from on high

Work of Worrying

- Worrying can warn you of danger and evoke action to prepare for that danger
- Procrastination is an ineffective way to cope with worrying, it stalls action and simply piles up more worries

- *What is the worst that could happen?*
- *What would I do if the worst really happened?*
- *How would I lessen the pain and get on with as much happiness as possible if the worse did occur?*
- *What alternatives would I have?*

- *What can I do now to lessen the probability of this dreaded event occurring?*
- *Is there anything I can do now to increase my chances of achieving my goal?*

- Once a threat is raised it must be dealt with to avoid stress
- Plans, action, and solutions are required to direct the energy and complete the work of worrying
- By using the work of worrying, creating *safety*, and using the language of the producer, you are establishing skills for maintaining genuine self-confidence

Persistent Starting

- You may need to overcome the fear of finishing
- Essentially all large tasks are completed in a series of starts
- Keep on starting, and finishing will take care of itself

The Unschedule

Key Ideas

- Only work will diminish your anxiety
- Thirty minutes can be all the time in the world to solve a problem when you are intensely focused
- The important thing is that *you got started*

Reverse Psychology

- The Unschedule is meant to help you integrate the Now Habit strategies and tools so you can focus your energy on being a producer
- The Unschedule integrates several well-recognized behavioral and psychological principles

What To Schedule

- Previously committed time such as meals, sleep, meetings
- Free time, recreation, leisure reading
- Socializing
- Health, activities such as tennis
- Routine events, commuting, classes

Fill-in

- Fill in your Unschedule with work on projects only *after* you have completed at least one-half hour of quality work
- Those periods have to refer only to *uninterrupted* work
- Reward yourself with a break or a change to a more enjoyable task
- Emphasize what you *did* accomplish

- Always leave at least one full day a week for recreation
- Before deciding to go to a recreational activity or social commitment, take time out for just thirty minutes of work
- Focus on *starting*
- *Think small*, aim for thirty minutes of quality work

- Keep starting, finishing will take of itself
- Never end down, never stop work when you're blocked or at the end of a section. Always stay with a tough spot for another five minutes or ten, trying to come up with at least a partial solution

Adjusting

- Within two weeks of using the Unschedule you can expect a broader awareness of your work patterns
- You are probably busier than you thought
- Certain days are less productive than others
- Other days are so busy that you need to lower your expectations

Benefits

- Realistic timekeeping
- Thirty minutes of quality time
- Experiencing success
- Self-imposed deadlines
- Newfound “free time”

Flow

The Right Side

- Most of us approach work as if we are only capable of linear thought (left hemisphere of cerebral cortex) and survival functioning (reptilian brain)
- Yet, if properly used, the right hemisphere of your cerebral cortex in just seconds can provide more than enough ideas to fill a book

- When starting a project we need to temporarily suspend criticism and linear thought
- Successful artists often start with an apparently random series of ideas centered around a theme; many of these ideas later proved superfluous to the final design, but were essential to the *process* of developing a new concept. That is, the early drafts are not discarded like mistakes, but are viewed

Focusing Exercise

- Two minutes, three breaths at each step
 - Letting go of the past
 - Letting go of the future
 - Centering in the present

The Procrastinator In Your Life

Others

- When interacting with a procrastinator act as a *consultant* not as a director
- Offer your support, be a sounding board, and help them be realistic, but don't try to decide things for them or judge their moral character

Managing

- Direct procrastinators towards *choice, safety, acknowledgement* for what they can do
- Avoid the criticism so familiar to them
- Focus on start, not finishing
- Praise should precede even the mildest form of recommendation for improvement

- Let your staff know which work has priority and stick to it
- Consider your decisions carefully
- Use subgoals and subdeadlines to give a greater sense of achievement
- Use *scheduled* meetings as opportunities to reward progress and to give constructive feedback

- Keep feedback focused on achieving the goal
- When mistakes occur, express your disappointment at your mutual failure to communicate clearly
- Keep it focused on what needs to be done to make the necessary corrections

Living With A Procrastinator

- Patience, do not nag
- Remember the motivations behind procrastination, be tolerant
- Substitute authoritarian phrases and criticism by “I would like”
- Move the language to “I want”, “I choose”, “I have decided”