

## Mastering the Art of Procrastination

Yup, you read it right. I'm talking about mastering 'the art of procrastination', not how to 'stop being a master procrastinator'. Let's face the truth, only someone like Dalai Lama has till date managed to grow out of idleness through Buddhist practices. In his words when he was a young student, "only in the face of a difficult challenge or an urgent deadline would [he] study and work without laziness." Later in his life, he went on preaching that, "Since the illusion of permanence fosters procrastination, it is crucial to reflect repeatedly on the fact that death could come at any time." By now we have established the fact that we are no Dalai Lamas but management students, so, our action plan would involve something like converting procrastination from our weakness to our strength. To get there one should start with knowing the Whats, Whos and Whys of procrastination.

People (like my mom) believe that procrastination is the same thing as being lazy. Let me start with telling you how wrong this notion is. Lazy people do tend to procrastinate but not all procrastinators are lazy. Procrastinators can be any bunch among the follows:

- people with a fear of failure
- people who lack the focus
- people with low energy
- people who demand excessive perfection
- and of course, lazy people

A wise man once said laziness can only be overcome by greed, love and fear. It's fair to assume that procrastinators are the kind of lazy people who spring to action when the deadline's in front of them. So, the right way ahead would involve using this fear of missing the deadline to our advantage. To do that we have to understand what exactly happens in our brain where procrastination is involved. For starters, human brains are wired in a way where we can picture this whole process as a fight that has been sparked between two parts of the mind when it's faced with a tedious task: a battle of the limbic system (the unconscious zone that includes the pleasure centre) and the prefrontal cortex (the internal 'planner'). When the limbic system dominates (which is pretty often), the result is putting off until tomorrow what could (and should) be done today.

The limbic system, which is one of the most dominant portions of our brain, is always working and is also part of the brain that is fully developed from birth. This limbic system controls our mood and instinct. Basic emotions like fear, anger, and pleasure, as well as certain 'drives', is under the control of this system. For example, the limbic system tells you to move your hand if it is near a cactus plant, or in a greater sense, it urges you to get away from seemingly unpleasant tasks.

The prefrontal cortex is the weaker portion of the brain that is located right behind the forehead. This is where you assimilate information and make decisions. Psychologists say that this part of the brain separates humans from animals. The prefrontal cortex is what eventually forces us to complete a job or task. This part doesn't work automatically. We need to put in the effort to make it function. As soon as you lose focus on a particular task, the limbic system takes over. This is when you become more interested in doing something that pleases you; thus, procrastination kicks in.

When procrastination kicks in, the following changes occur in our brain. The amygdala is the section of the brain associated with our automatic emotional reaction to a situation. In moments of being overwhelmed, such as having many tasks to do or a particularly difficult one, there is a fight (resistance) or flight (ignore) reaction. Both are forms of procrastination – the brain is protecting us against possible negative feelings. The norepinephrine chemical takes over, causing increased levels of fear and anxiety. That's when the adrenaline gets pumped into the picture.

Our brain is like a drug addict. We are addicted to dopamine, which is produced by pleasurable experiences, and so long as a task has a higher likelihood (or perceived future likelihood) of producing dopamine, our brain is addicted to performing these activities while actively avoiding the others.

This being the scientific explanation behind procrastination, let us see how we can use it to our advantage.

- 1) Use the adrenaline rush- adrenaline makes the pain go away (pain of completing undesirable tasks). It also gives us the needed energy to perform the task faster and with more focus than we could muster up on the days before it. During moments of high adrenaline, we also tend to think better which helps with our efficiency.

- 2) What I would also recommend is being prepared for that mini attack of fear cum anxiety. For example, you have to write a critique on a TED talk as I had to do recently. Gather all the needed resources beforehand, like class notes on effective communication, a critique for reference, some TED talks to choose amongst, the format of the assignment, etc. so that when the adrenaline kicks in you can turn into Flash and get everything done. If you prepare absolutely nothing and try to make do with existing resources your work is most likely to be subpar than your usual standards. Here we are trying to master procrastination which does not involve performing subpar. The adrenaline is already busy in providing energy and focus, so we have to help it along by having everything ready at our fingertips when we finally sit down to get things done.
- 3) Creative procrastination- this isn't actual procrastination but a rational action when you hit a creative block. Writers do this all the time. If you have to come up with a theme or sell an idea, let creative procrastination happen. What we should not do here is to engage ourselves too much that we might lose track of what the task was. We can keep gentle reminders in between so that the task remains in the back of our minds and we are better able to get inspired by our environment.
- 4) Create your own deadlines- this might not be as effective as actual deadlines but it sure does build our will power. If you are a shopaholic, try not to buy stuff till your work is done by your deadline. You might even end up completing it beforehand because you can't give up on shopping. This doesn't have to be negative encouragement, you can even keep other enticements, involve your peer group, etc.

When we are trying to use any of the above-mentioned tricks, we should not forget the purpose of doing it. The only thing which makes us procrastinate is our will power, we let the limbic system govern our actions instead of the prefrontal cortex and wait for amygdala to do the job. Tim Urban calls it using the 'panic monster' to drive away 'the instant gratification monkey' and let the 'rational decision-maker' take the wheel. Here we are trying to acknowledge procrastination is a reality of our lives and hence using it to be better. Our real goal is to remove this mental block associated with procrastination, where we label ourselves as master procrastinators and keep postponing chores or duties. Yes, we are procrastinators, so we have to wear this label as a crown and start performing better than we used to.

Not everything comes with a deadline. There is no deadline to learn a new language or start a fitness regime or to get away from an unhealthy relationship. Failure comes for everybody at some point of time and perfection simply does not exist. This is where procrastinators end up living in guilt or dissatisfaction, not because they are not living their dream lives but because they did not even start chasing it. Know that the real art of mastering procrastination is the process of overcoming procrastination. Albert Einstein is credited with saying, “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.” Here, it is up to us how we choose to be wise over being insane.

**By**  
**Shyamli Soundale**  
*PGDM No. 19051*