



## Put Off Procrastinating!!

### Module I

## **Understanding Procrastination Part I**

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## Introduction

If you ask the average person “are you a procrastinator?”, they will often grin sheepishly and reluctantly tell you about all the things they ‘put off’ doing in their lives. Most people identify with procrastinating on certain tasks at certain times in their life. Studies across the United States, United Kingdom and Australia have found that around 20% of adults in the general population are chronic procrastinators, and it is often much higher in school or university settings (75%-95%!!!). So this means procrastination is a fairly typical behaviour for a lot of people, so remember you are not alone! However, there is a difference between general procrastination, which we all do at certain times, and more problematic procrastination. So if you are a person that finds procrastination has taken over and stopped you from leading a good life, you may want to keep reading the ‘Put Off Procrastinating’ Modules. These will help you understand your procrastination, and later learn ways to overcome procrastination to lead a more fulfilling life.

## What Is Procrastination?

Often people mistake procrastination for “laziness”. They talk about it as if it were some nasty character flaw. We hope that as you read through this series of modules, you will soon realise that procrastination has nothing to do with being lazy. So, if it isn’t laziness, what do we really mean by the term ‘Procrastination’? People will often use definitions like, “putting off”, “postponing”, “delaying”, “deferring”, “leaving to the last minute” – all of which are valid. What we mean by procrastination is...

*...making a **decision for no valid reason to delay or not complete** a task or goal you’ve **committed too**, and instead **doing something of lesser importance**, despite there being **negative consequences** to not following through on the original task or goal.*

You can see from this definition that procrastination is in some way an intentional decision. Having said that, it may happen very fast, almost automatically, and be like a habit, so often you may not even realise that you’ve made the decision. Another element is that you needlessly put off or don’t complete something you made a commitment to doing. You generally substitute the task for something that is a lesser priority. And most importantly you do this despite there being a lot of disadvantages to procrastinating. What tends to distinguish more general ‘putting-off’ or ‘delaying’ from a more serious procrastination problem is how bad the negative consequences are that follow the procrastination.

## What Do You Procrastinate About?

Being a procrastinator doesn’t mean you are necessarily a person who puts off doing *everything* in life, although this may be the case for some. There are so many different areas of our lives in which we can procrastinate. Some of these areas may be more obvious (i.e., study or work projects) and others may be more subtle (i.e., health check-ups, changing our diet or exercise routine). Really any task we need to complete, any problem we need to solve or any goal we might want to achieve, can be a source of procrastination. For many people, there will be certain areas of their life they are able to keep on top of, and certain areas where procrastination reigns.

To help you assess what it is you procrastinate about and what facets of your life you put off, for the next week carry a small note pad around with you. Use this to help yourself become more aware of your day to day actions. Any time you notice that you have put off something important in favour of doing something less important, even though you know it won’t be good for you in the long run – jot down the activity, task, problem or goal you put off. That way you can start to collect some information about what areas of your life you procrastinate on and what areas you follow through on.

## Put Off Procrastinating!!

Having paid more attention to your actions over the week, and also remembering past things you have put off, look through the list below and highlight the types of **Tasks/Goals** you tend to procrastinate about:

<p><b>Work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Meeting deadlines</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Making phone calls</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Attending meetings</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Starting or finishing projects</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Being assertive with colleagues</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Paperwork</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Job applications</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Research or reading</li> </ul>	<p><b>Household</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Daily chores (dishes, tidying, cooking, etc)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Bigger chores (vacuuming, washing, ironing, etc)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Spring cleaning the house</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Household projects</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Maintenance and fixing things</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Grocery shopping</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Gardening</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Running errands</li> </ul>
<p><b>Study</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Meeting deadlines</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Attending classes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Homework</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Assignments</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Studying for exams</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Research or reading</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Asking questions or requesting help</li> </ul>	<p><b>Health</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Making medical appointments</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Attending medical appointments</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Changing diet</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Starting an exercise routine</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Losing weight</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quitting smoking/alcohol/drugs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Opening mail</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Paying the bills</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Budgeting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Book keeping</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tax return</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Paying back debts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social, Family &amp; Relationships</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Making phone calls</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Replying to invitations</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Spending time with others</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Arranging get togethers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Attending get togethers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Discussing problems</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self-Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Starting a course you always wanted to do</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Starting a hobby</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Getting involved in something spiritual</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Relaxation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Decision Making</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Making plans</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Committing to something new</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Choosing between options</li> </ul>
<p><b>Others</b></p>	

Now think about which of these causes you the most grief, distress, negative consequences and problems in your life. Choose one of those tasks/goals to work on throughout the 'Put Off Procrastinating' Modules. It may even be a good idea to start with the easiest task/goal first. We know you may want to tackle all of them at once. But remember procrastination is an old habit. To develop a new habit of following through on things, you need to start slowly, and take it one step at a time. So choose one task/goal to start applying the techniques you will read about in the Modules, and when you have made some progress, you can then choose another task/goal to tackle. Doing things this way will increase the likelihood that you will move from 'procrastinator' to 'doer'.

Tasks/Goals I would like to work on using the 'Put Off Procrastinating' Modules are:

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**How Do You Procrastinate?**

We mentioned before that usually when you procrastinate, you substitute an important task or goal that you have committed yourself to, with another activity that isn't a priority at that time. So let's have a think about the typical sorts of things you do instead of the task or goal at hand. These are your **Procrastination Activities**, that is, all the diversionary things you do that take you further away from the task or your goal. Again you may use your notebook to jot down over the week the things you tend to find yourself doing instead of what you set out to do.

Below are some common diversions. You can highlight the ones that seem to be most relevant to you.

<p><b>Pleasurable Tasks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Movies, TV, DVDs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reading Books, Magazines, Newspapers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Computer games</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Surfing the Net</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Music</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Shopping</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Beach</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Hobbies (art, craft, etc)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Lower Priority Tasks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Exercising</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Paperwork</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sorting things</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tidying</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other less important projects</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Checking emails</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Researching a topic of interest</li> </ul>
<p><b>Socialising</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Seeing friends, family, partner</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Phoning friends, family, partner</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Going out</li> </ul>	<p><b>Daydreaming</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Thinking about the past or future</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Imagining the task/goal is already finished</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Imagining a better life</li> </ul>
<p><b>Distractions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Eating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Smoking</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Drinking</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Drugs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Others</b></p>

It is important to become aware of the things that typically distract you from your task or goal. It is not that these activities are in themselves bad and should be stopped. We all need pleasurable things in our lives, we all need a break from harder tasks by balancing these with more menial tasks, we all need social time and distractions in our lives, and a bit of daydreaming can be a nice escape at times. These activities are only a problem, when doing them is to our detriment because we don't complete really important tasks or goals. So next time you notice yourself doing one of the above activities you can ask yourself "Am I doing this as a way of procrastinating?" If the answer is "No – there isn't a more important task I need to be doing right now", then keep going. If the answer is "Yes – I am using this as a substitute for something very important", then maybe you need to rethink things.



## Do You Excuse Procrastination?

Choosing to do something other than the task you have committed to can feel uncomfortable. Deep down we often think we “should” be doing a more important task and we “shouldn’t” be procrastinating. As such, we may feel a great deal of guilt or shame for having delayed tasks that are important. So, to help us get by and feel less guilty, we will often excuse our procrastination in some way. That is, we will come up with some justification for our procrastination activities, making it OK that we have put things off. Again you may use your notebook to jot down any excuses you notice yourself use over the week, that help make your procrastination OK to you. When you do this you are trying to catch the self-talk that goes through your mind and says you have good reason to procrastinate, and that your procrastination is acceptable and justified.



Below are some common **Procrastination Excuses**. Highlight the ones that you have used over the week or you know you have used a lot in the past. It is important to become aware of the self-talk that you use to excuse your procrastination.

- “I’m too tired, I’ll do it tomorrow”
- “I don’t have everything I need, I can’t start it now”
- “I don’t have enough time to do it all, so I will wait until I do”
- “It is too late to start it now”
- “I won’t get much done, so I’ll just leave it for now”
- “It is better to do it when I am in the mood or feeling inspired”
- “I will miss out on the fun happening now, I can do it another time”
- “It is too nice a day to spend on this”
- “I will do it once this other thing is finished”
- “I’ve got to organise my desk/kitchen/laundry, etc first”
- “I’ve got to exercise first”
- “I am too busy to do it now”
- “I have plenty of time, so I can do it later”
- “I work better when I am stressed, so I will leave it to the last minute”
- “It might not be good enough, so why bother doing it”
- “Working on it today won’t make any difference”
- Others: \_\_\_\_\_  
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The thing with these excuses is that there is often some truth to them. For example, it may be true that you are tired, you don’t have everything you need, you don’t have enough time to do it all now, you aren’t in the mood, or it is a nice day, and so on... The problem is that you then conclude from these truths that it is OK not to do the task now, but to leave it to another time. It is this conclusion that needs to change, and in later modules we will show you how to do that, so that there are no more excuses.

## Module Summary

- Procrastination is a common part of human behaviour and is not the same as “laziness”.
- Procrastination means to decide for no valid reason to delay or not complete a task or goal you’ve committed to, and instead do something of lesser importance, despite there being negative consequences to not following through on the original task or goal.
- Problematic procrastination can be distinguished from more general procrastination by how bad the negative consequences are of us not following through on things.
- Procrastination can occur in many different areas of one’s life. It can involve tasks or goals in life domains such as work, household, study, health, financial, social, family, relationships, self-development, and decision making.
- Procrastination activities are the things you do as a diversion from or substitute for the key task or goal you need to accomplish. These can involve activities such as pleasurable tasks, lower priority tasks, socialising, daydreaming and distractions.
- To avoid the guilt associated with procrastination, we often generate excuses for our procrastination which help us feel justified and OK with putting things off. These excuses often imply that because of some set of circumstances, we are better off leaving the task to another time.



### Coming up next ...

In the next module we will look at the main reasons people procrastinate, as well as the consequences of procrastination and how these work to keep you procrastinating.

## About The Modules

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### BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for procrastination is based on the approach that procrastination is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

### REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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