Have you ever thought to yourself, “I’ll do that tomorrow,” or “…over the summer or winter break,” or even “I’ll wait until I’m done with school—when I have more time.” Don’t wait. Just do it! Later may not be a better time. Remember: what you do now does matter. Start reaping the benefits of a healthier and more productive lifestyle today—and for years to come.

After going through this lesson, you will be able to:

- Define procrastination;
- Identify commonly procrastinated tasks and goals;
- Define and identify procrastination activities;
- Identify the types of excuses people use to justify their procrastination;
- Identify and understand unhelpful rules and assumptions that contribute to procrastination;
- Identify positive and negative consequences of procrastination and how each contributes to procrastination; and
- Recognize the steps in the procrastination cycle.

The pages within this lesson come from a set of modules called “Put Off Procrastinating!!” created by the Centre for Clinical Interventions in Australia.

Note that, because Australian English is slightly different from American English, you’ll notice some differences in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, but the meaning of the text is clear and relevant, nonetheless. We give special thanks to the Centre for granting us permission to use this content. If you wish, you can access and download the full original modules via the link in the resources tab below.

We strongly suggest that you download and print the “Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook linked in the resources tab below before you begin this lesson so that you can complete the worksheets as you go.

One last note before we get started: we’ve shared some other resources that you may find interesting and helpful in the resources tabs throughout the lesson pages and encourage you to check them out!

Resources
“Put Off Procrastinating!!” Modules
“Put Off Procrastinating" Workbook
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 behavior 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. … These [lessons] will help you understand your procrastination and…learn ways to overcome procrastination...

**Often people mistake procrastination for “laziness.”**

They talk about it as if it were some nasty character flaw. We hope that…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,” [or] “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 to, 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.

**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, [or] 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 [consider] carry[ing] 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.

[In the meantime]…remembering past things you have put off, look [at the table of commonly procrastinated tasks and goals in your workbook [and identify] the types of tasks and goals you tend to procrastinate about.

**Resources**

“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook

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… 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…, 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.’

[What task/goal might you like to work on throughout these ‘Put Off Procrastinating’ lessons?]

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.

[The Procrastination Activities table in your workbook] lists some common diversions. [Identify] the ones that seem to be most relevant to you.

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 day dreaming 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.

Resources:
“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook
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:

- “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 organize 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”

[Using the Procrastination Excuses Checklist in your workbook, identify] the ones that you have used over the [past] week or you know you have used a lot in the past.

[Can you think of any others?]

It is important to become aware of the self-talk that you use to excuse your procrastination.

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.

**Resources**

"Put Off Procrastinating" Workbook

...Something that people always want to know is, “why do I procrastinate?”

People will often say “I know it isn’t good for me, I know it just makes things worse, yet I keep doing it....why?????” So let’s have a look at the underlying reasons for procrastination. But as we do this, remember... whilst it is very helpful to understand the reason you procrastinate, it often isn’t essential for overcoming procrastination. ...you will learn practical strategies... that work regardless of what the underlying reason is for your procrastination.

We come from the point of view that the core reasons people procrastinate have something to do with the way they see themselves and the world. We all have rules and assumptions by which we live our lives. For example, I might have the rule that “it is important to be kind to others whenever possible,” or the assumption that “if I commit a crime, then I will be punished.” These rules and assumptions seem pretty helpful in the sense that they are fairly accurate in capturing how things really are (i.e., it is typically true that punishment follows a crime), and they are also flexible (i.e., it is not always going to be possible to be kind to others 100% of the time, but doing so whenever possible is reasonable). However, we can also have more unhelpful rules and assumptions by which we try to lead our lives. A rule or assumption tends to be unhelpful when it is inaccurate and inflexible in some way. At the heart of procrastination lies certain Unhelpful Rules/Assumptions, we call these the “shoulds,” “musts” and “can’ts.” Below are the most common unhelpful rules and assumptions linked to procrastination.

- Need to be in charge
- Pleasure seeking
Sleep, Eat & Exercise

- Fear of failure or disapproval
- Fear of uncertainty or catastrophe
- Low self-confidence
- Depleted energy

Need to Be In Charge
Some people have rules like, “I must be in charge at all times,” “I must always call the shots in my life,” “Things should be done my way,” “I shouldn’t have to do things that I don’t want to do,” or “I shouldn’t have to do things just because someone else says so.” These rules reflect the type of person who resents not being in control, not being independent or not holding the power. This person often assumes that, “if I am not 100% in charge of what I do, then I am weak.” You can imagine that, for this person, when they are faced with a task they don’t want to do that is imposed on them by someone else (e.g., a supervisor, teacher, family member, partner), then they will feel angry and resentful because they see themselves as not in control. They may then use procrastination as a way of easing their anger and sense of weakness, and helping them feel like they do have the power because they are doing (or not doing) the task on their own terms.

Pleasure Seeking
Some people live their lives according to the principle that pleasure is paramount. They are impulsive, seek out pleasure and have difficulty tolerating boredom. These people may have rules like, “life is too short to be doing things that are boring or hard, fun should always come first.” They may have assumptions like, “if I forgo fun, then I will become a boring lifeless drone.” These rules and assumptions reflect a need for instant gratification and a difficulty accepting ideas like, “short term pain for long term gain.” For this person, it is hard to look beyond the short term and be patient enough to wait for any long term pay off. You can imagine that, for this person, when faced with an uninteresting task (e.g., work project, assignment, household chore, [or] doing the week’s budget), they will feel frustrated and bored. They may then use procrastination as a way of alleviating boredom and frustration and helping them seek out the pleasure they so desire.

Fear of Failure or Disapproval
Some people put a lot of pressure on themselves to complete tasks or goals to a very high standard, sometimes even demanding perfection of themselves. The problem is that when they demand such extraordinary efforts, they often fear that they will fall short and conclude that they will either fail or someone will disapprove of them. These types of people may have rules like, “I must do things perfectly,” “I must not fail,” or “I can’t have others think poorly of me.” They may have assumptions like, “if I try, then I will only fail,” or “if I put my work out there, then others will think badly of me.” You can imagine, for this person, when faced
with a task that is going to be evaluated in some way (e.g., exam, report, art work, socialising, [or] making a lifestyle change), they predict they will fail or others will judge them negatively, and as such they feel anxious, fearful or embarrassed. Their fears may paralyse them from being able to do the task, and procrastination may be used as a way of avoiding their fears of failure or disapproval. That is, a motivation for their procrastination may be that you can’t fail or be judged negatively by others if you never follow through on the task in the first place.

As an aside, another underlying reason for procrastination that is often mentioned is fear of success, which often is really a delayed fear of failure in disguise (e.g., “if I succeed, then more will be expected of me and I won’t be able to cut it”).

**Fear of Uncertainty or Catastrophe**
Some people fear the unknown. They need to be very certain of what lies ahead, and if they are uncertain they may predict catastrophe as a way of preparing themselves should the worst happen. These types of people may have rules like, “I must be certain” or “I should be prepared for the worst.” They may hold assumptions like, “if I take action, then something bad will happen” or “I am better off not doing anything than risk it going bad.” In life it is hard to be 100% certain about anything, so when faced with tasks or goals where uncertainty lies (e.g., decision making, health check-ups, [or] confronting a relationship problem), these people will feel very anxious and fearful. They may then use procrastination as a way of alleviating their fear by putting off any action that could lead to an unknown or catastrophic outcome. In this way their procrastination ensures nothing changes for the mean time, and hence, if nothing changes, nothing bad can happen, at least for now, so they temporarily feel more certain about things. In addition, fear of success mentioned above can also be a fear of uncertainty in disguise (e.g., “if I succeed, then everything will change, and what if it is for the worse”).

**Low Self-Confidence**
Some people don’t think much of themselves generally. They doubt their abilities and lack confidence that they are capable individuals who can tackle tasks or goals that come their way. These types of people may have rules like, “I can’t do things because I am incapable” or assumptions like, “if I try things, then my inadequacies will show through.” For these types of people, when faced with a task that requires some self-confidence to tackle it (e.g. taking on new work
Sleep, Eat & Exercise

responsibilities, starting a new course or hobby, [or] confronting a family member), these people will have no self-belief that they can do it, and hence will feel depressed and despairing. They may then use procrastination as a way of not having to face that they can’t do something because of their flaws. As such, by not trying or by giving up at a task, they avoid having to see their supposed incapabilities and inadequacies because they never put themselves in challenging situations to truly see what they are made of.

Depleted Energy
Some people don’t think they are capable when life becomes tough. That is, under certain circumstances, they don’t believe they have the ability to complete tasks and fulfill goals. Some of these circumstances are: when they are stressed because there are a lot of competing demands in their life; when they are physically or mentally fatigued in some way; when their motivation is low and they don’t have the inspiration to do things; or when they are depressed and aren’t in the mood to get things done. These people have rules like, “I can’t do things when I am stressed/fatigued/unmotivated/depressed” or “I must rest when my energy is low,” or assumptions like, “if I do things when I am stressed/fatigued/unmotivated/depressed, I will make things worse.” For these people, when they are faced with a task at a time when their energy is depleted, they will feel exhausted and possibly despairing and frustrated because they believe they can’t do it. They may then use procrastination as a way of trying to rebuild energy and get rid of their exhaustion, with the idea that, if I rest rather than do, things will somehow get better.

Now, being a procrastinator doesn’t mean you have all six of these unhelpful rules and assumptions just mentioned.

You may only possess one of these, some combination of them, or a less common unhelpful rule or assumption. Also, different unhelpful rules and assumptions may be relevant for different types of procrastination situations. So which of these unhelpful rules and assumptions do you most identify with? Think of all your past examples of procrastination…was your procrastination related to: needing to be in charge, wanting to seek pleasure, fearing failure or disapproval by others, fearing uncertainty or catastrophe, having low confidence in yourself, or having problems with your energy levels?
To help you work out which unhelpful rules and assumptions you live by, [take a look at the Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions Quiz in your workbook and note] the statements you most identify with, as these might be a clue as to the unhelpful rules and assumptions that apply most to you.

So, what are your unhelpful rules that lead you to procrastinate?

That is, what do you expect from yourself or life that leads you to put off important things?

And, what are your unhelpful assumptions that lead you to procrastinate? That is, what do you expect will happen if you actually attempt the types of tasks you procrastinate on?

It may be hard to work out what your unhelpful rules and assumptions are, but give it a go. If you struggle with this don’t worry. Remember, to overcome procrastination, you don’t always need to know the exact underlying reason for your procrastination.

Procrastination carries with it a number of consequences depending on the situation.

Some of these consequences might be considered to be positive, whilst some are negative. The main thing to know is that these consequences actually keep you procrastinating. The Positive Consequences, or in other words the pay-offs for procrastinating, understandably are going to make you more likely to procrastinate next time you face the task or goal because you got something good out of procrastinating and procrastination worked for you in some way. At the same time, the Negative Consequences often make the situation worse in some way, making the task or goal even harder or more unpleasant in many senses, and this also makes you more likely to continue procrastinating on the task or goal next time.

Let’s have a closer look at some of the positive and negative consequences of procrastination.

Relieve Discomfort
Positive
• Relieve Discomfort
• Stick To Your Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions
• Gain Pleasure

Negative
• More Discomfort
• Your Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions Stay Intact
• Self-Criticism Backfires
• Things Pile Up
• Punishment Or Loss

A positive consequence of procrastinating is that it often initially relieves discomfort you may have about approaching or following through with a task. You will have noticed that each of the six unhelpful rules and assumptions mentioned before tend to lead to some feeling of discomfort when faced with a task or goal. This discomfort might be anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion and so on. You will have also noticed from our previous discussion that procrastination can often work to alleviate this discomfort in some way because procrastination allows you to avoid the task that is making you feel uncomfortable. So if you don’t like feeling uncomfortable, the relief procrastination can bring is going [to] make procrastination look like an attractive option for you in the future...

Stick to Your Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions
Another positive to procrastinating is that, by doing so, you feel better for having stuck to your unhelpful rules and assumptions. For example, by procrastinating, you may feel one of the following things because you have abided by your rules:

• Need To Be In Charge: an increased sense of power and control because you are doing things on your own terms;
• Pleasure Seeking: an increased sense of pleasure because you are living for the moment;
• Fear of Failure or Disapproval: a reduced likelihood of failure or disapproval from someone else because you haven’t put yourself out there to be evaluated in any way;
• Fear of Uncertainty or Catastrophe: an increased sense of certainty or that you have averted catastrophe because nothing has changed in your life that could tempt fate;
• Low Self-Confidence: your self-image stays intact because you haven’t challenged yourself and potentially revealed your incapacibilities or inadequacies;
Sleep, Eat & Exercise

- Depleted Energy: you think you are doing the right thing to replenish your energy because you are taking it easy on yourself and avoiding challenges.

Gain Pleasure
A final positive consequence of procrastinating is that the activities you engage in as a substitute for doing the task at hand (e.g., pleasurable tasks, lower priority tasks, socialising, distractions, [or] daydreaming) will often be pleasurable in themselves. The pleasures you get from these diversions will have their own pay off.

[Now let’s consider the negative consequences of procrastination.]

More Discomfort
Although, under the positive consequences, procrastination has the potential to relieve discomfort about doing a task that arises from your unhelpful rules and assumptions, on the down side procrastination can also produce a different sort of discomfort. Often, the more you procrastinate, the more you might feel guilty or ashamed of your actions. You may feel more anxious because the task is getting worse and more overwhelming the longer you put it off. You may feel despair, as the longer you don’t do it the more you think you can’t tackle it.

Your Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions Stay Intact
The unhelpful rules and assumptions you have, which are the very reason for your procrastination, tend to stay intact the more you procrastinate. When you procrastinate, you avoid engaging in tasks and goals that have the potential to challenge your rules and assumptions and allow you to see that they may not be accurate or flexible for different situations. For example, by procrastinating you never learn the following about your rules and assumptions:

- Need To Be In Charge: you can tolerate doing things you don’t want to or that someone else has told you to do, at times, and when you do these things, it doesn’t make you weak at all, but a normal functioning member of society;
- Pleasure Seeking: you can tolerate boredom and frustration, and at times short term boredom will be worthwhile in the long run and will make your pleasurable times even sweeter;
- Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval: you can do things imperfectly and not fail or be judged badly; generally, it is very seldom that you outright fail or get judged poorly, and on the rare occasion this does happen, you can tolerate this and move forward;
- Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe: uncertainty is a part of life that everyone has to tolerate, and not taking action just keeps you stuck and stagnant, rather than making anything more certain or preventing a catastrophe. On the whole, things work out OK, and on the times they don’t, there are things you can do to cope and survive;
Sleep, Eat & Exercise

- Low Self-Confidence: you can do more than you give yourself credit for; you are not incapable or inadequate, but merely have strengths and weaknesses, just like anyone else;
- Depleted Energy: you can do more than you think when your energy is low, and your energy, stress, motivation and mood often improve the more you tackle things step by step, rather than rest.

Self-Criticism Backfires
People will often beat themselves up and become highly self-critical as a consequence of their procrastination. They will say things to themselves like, “you lazy so and so, pull yourself together and get started, you know you should do this!” The intention of doing this is often to motivate yourself into action, sort of a ‘tough love’ approach. However, this generally backfires, as the more you chastise yourself, the more the task or goal feels like a chore and the more unmotivated you will feel, hence the more you will keep procrastinating. If you don’t believe us, think of how you might motivate a child or a good friend to do a task. Would you be harsh and yell at them? Or, would you be encouraging and praising?

Things Pile Up
The more you put something off, the more tasks pile up around you, the more demands you have to meet, and the more time pressures you face. Deadlines generally don’t change, but now the time you have to do things is less. The more things pile up in this way, the more overwhelming and aversive the task becomes, and hence the more you want to avoid it by procrastinating.

Punishment or Loss
As a result of not having done a task or goal, you may experience some sort of punishment or loss from the environment around you. For example, you may lose your job or a relationship, you may get a bad mark on an assignment, the health checks you have to do may be even more unpleasant the longer you wait, and by not making a decision, great opportunities might pass you by. The punishments or losses you may experience can make it harder for you to keep going, persist and follow through. They can make the situation more aversive and hence you will be more likely to give up by procrastinating.

Which of the positive and negative consequences do you most identify with?
Think of all your past examples of procrastination you have so far been analyzing. [Using the Consequences Table in your workbook] jot down any positive consequences and negative consequences you experienced as a result of your procrastination, and reflect on how both the positives and negatives have kept you procrastinating over the long term.

Resources:
“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook

Understanding Procrastination 13
Sleep, Eat & Exercise

Hopefully, you are now starting to realize that procrastination is a more complex process than just being “lazy.”

“Laziness” is far too simple an explanation. Now that we have analysed all the different aspects of procrastination, let’s put them together in a cycle of how procrastination works...

As you can see, at the end of the day, procrastination is about needing to avoid some sort of discomfort about doing a task that arises because of certain unhelpful rules and assumptions we hold about ourselves and how the world works.

Also, if we are able to excuse our procrastination and feel it is justified, this makes it even more likely that we will procrastinate, rather than suffer through and tolerate the discomfort. And finally, the pay-offs and costs that arise from our procrastination just keep us stuck in this habit. We are more likely to procrastinate next time because we got both something good out of our procrastination as well as made the task even more unpleasant by putting it off, hence compelling us to avoid it again.

You can make your own procrastination cycle [in your workbook]...using some of the things you have already written down...

Resources
“Put Off Procrastinating" Workbook

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