Sleep, Eat & Exercise  
Changing Procrastination

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

- Recognize what needs to happen in order to change the procrastination habit;
- Recognize the importance of assessing readiness to change and how to do so;
- Identify a variety of strategies for prioritizing and approaching tasks, scheduling, overcoming procrastination, adjusting unhelpful rules and assumptions, and tolerating discomfort; and
- Create an action plan for overcoming procrastination.

Reminder: 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 than 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.

If you haven’t already, 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
Now that you understand what goes on when you procrastinate, you may ask, “how do I change my procrastination?” and “what is it I need to do now?”

The path to changing procrastination requires addressing three particular aspects of the procrastination cycle:

- Dismissing Procrastination Excuses...
- [Applying] Practical Techniques To Stop Procrastination...
- Adjusting Unhelpful Rules/Assumptions & Tolerating Discomfort...

Remember, you have already taken the first step to overcoming procrastination by becoming more aware and recognising your procrastination. From what we have done so far, you have been able to stop and reflect on what it is you do when you procrastinate, rather than letting it continue on as an automatic habit. Another step before you start practicing the strategies you will read about...is acceptance. You need to recognise that procrastination is a normal human behaviour. We know from our discussion of the negative consequences of procrastination that judging yourself for procrastinating and feeling guilty and ashamed just demotivates you and makes your tasks and goals even more aversive, and hence makes you more likely to procrastinate. Instead, you need to adopt a non-judgemental attitude towards your procrastination. So, rather than telling yourself, “I shouldn’t procrastinate, doing so makes me a lazy good for nothing person,” you may instead take a more accepting attitude that, “everyone procrastinates, it is something I would prefer not to do as, it is not helping my life, and so I will turn my focus to committing to changing this habit as best I can.” From now on, when you notice judging, blaming, guilty or shameful thoughts about your procrastination, try to see them as just thoughts (not facts). Acknowledge that these thoughts don’t help you, you don’t need to buy into them or listen to them, and just let them go by focusing instead on what you can do to change and make your situation better.

So, now you know what is in store in order to change your procrastination.

It is always helpful before you embark on the journey of change to ask yourself the questions: “How much do I want to change?” “Do I just want to talk and think about the problem, or do I want to do something about it?” “Do I want to put in the effort required to make changes in my life?” and “Do I want to start doing things differently?”
There is an old saying that, “if you always do what you've always done, you will always get what you’ve always got.” Change involves doing things differently, and that can be hard, so the question is, “Are you willing to commit to change now?”

To help you weigh up how much you... want to change, it can be helpful to consider the following.

- Being a procrastinator, what do I get out of it that is negative? What are the disadvantages? How does it hurt me?
- Being a procrastinator, what do I get out of it that is positive? What are the advantages? How does it help me?
- If I do change and no longer procrastinate, what will be good about that? How will my life be better? What will be the benefits of change for me?
- If I do change and no longer procrastinate, what will be bad about that? What will I have to give up? What will be the costs of change for me?

[Complete the Do I Want to Change? Table in your workbook.]

Resources
“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook

Hopefully the hurt procrastination brings you and the good you think will come from changing outweighs how much procrastination helps you and the bad you think will come from changing.

During the times that it is hard to stick with your commitment to changing your procrastination habit, reflect on the ways procrastination hurts you and the good things you expect from change as a way of motivating yourself to keep going and stay on track.

However, if the ways procrastination helps you and the bad things you anticipate from changing are winning out at the moment, it is going to make a lot of sense that changing this habit will be particularly difficult, and you may not be ready for the process. You may need to give it some more thought and think of ways you can overcome these obstacles. See [the Roadblocks Table in your workbook] for an example of what you might do to overcome the obstacles standing in between you and changing your procrastination habit. Use the [blank] columns to work through your roadblocks... For each roadblock, think of
the types of things you may need to say to yourself (i.e., self-talk) and types of things you can do (i.e., actions) to overcome these obstacles and embark on the journey of changing your procrastination.

**Resources**

“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook

...we often create excuses for our procrastination.

These excuses justify our behaviour as reasonable, acceptable and OK. If we feel OK about putting things off, it makes sense that we will be more likely to procrastinate on a task or goal. Therefore, we need to deal with the self-talk that goes through our mind and excuses our procrastination so that we no longer feel it is OK to procrastinate. The other type of self-talk that needs to be dealt with is when we become highly critical of ourselves for procrastinating.

Again, as we have already learned, self-criticism just demotivates us, making us more likely to procrastinate. ...you will learn ways to dismiss the destructive self-talk of making excuses and criticising yourself.

**Remember, our procrastination excuses often revolve around identifying some truth about the situation, and from this concluding we are better off delaying our task or goal to another time.**

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Truth</th>
<th>Unhelpful Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am really tired</td>
<td>I am better off doing it after I have rested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t want to do it now</td>
<td>I may feel more like doing it tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will miss out on the fun happening now</td>
<td>I can always wait till nothing much is happening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have everything I need</td>
<td>I will wait till I do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have plenty of time</td>
<td>So I don’t have to start it now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t feel inspired</td>
<td>I will wait till I do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have other things to do</td>
<td>I will do it once those things are finished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have enough time to get it all done</td>
<td>I will wait till I have a lot of time to do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work better under pressure</td>
<td>So I will leave it to the last minute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We have labelled these types of conclusions as unhelpful because they ignore that going with the situation or how we feel at the time may not actually be the best course of action for us in the long run. They also often relate to the unrealistic notion that tomorrow will somehow miraculously be a better time to
get productive and follow through with things. Often, if we wait for a time when we feel rested, motivated, inspired, have no distractions, have everything we possibly need, have heaps of time, have finished all the other things that we could possibly be doing...we will be waiting till ‘the cows come home.’ We will be waiting a very long time for just the right conditions to come together to get started on a task or goal. The real truth is that no time is probably ideal for doing something we don’t feel like doing, hence now is just as good as any other time to get cracking. Unhelpful conclusions often ignore the fact that, if we get started and take a step forward towards completing our task or goal, no matter how small the step, our desire to do that task or goal often increases and we can get some valuable things done. This means that, by taking action first, all the other things often fall into place for us and we feel capable of continuing forward and getting the job done.

So, what can we do about these unhelpful conclusions that keep us procrastinating?

One way is to challenge the unhelpful conclusions and come up with new more helpful conclusions that we can tell ourselves to get us moving, doing, and taking action. The other option is to test our unhelpful conclusions and see if they really hold up.

When you challenge your conclusions, you take the role of detective, questioning if your conclusions are really valid.
Are they based on fact and evidence? Or, are your conclusions something you have jumped to based on not much concrete evidence at all?

The following are the types of questions you can ask yourself to become your own detective and find out if your conclusions really are true, and hence see if your procrastination really is justified. They are called disputation questions because you use them to dispute your procrastination excuses.

- What is the factual evidence or reason that it is better for me to put off this task or goal?
- What is the factual evidence or reason that it is better for me to start this task or goal now?
- Is it really true that I will be better off in the long run delaying this task or goal?
- Is it really true that I can’t make even a small start on the task or goal right now?
- Can I still get some parts of the
task or goal done now, even though conditions aren’t ideal?

- Is it really true that later is a better time to do it?
- If I do make some start on the task or goal right now, what might happen?
  How might I feel?
- If I don’t make a start on the task or goal right now, what might happen?
  How might I feel?

See [the Procrastination Excuse pages in your workbook] for an example of how to use these questions to challenge your procrastination excuses [as well as a blank worksheet that] allows you to practice challenging your common procrastination excuses. Use this to work on the excuses you have been using to put off the task/goal that you have decided to work on throughout these [lessons].

**Resources**

“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook

So, at the end of the day we are aiming to find new helpful conclusions that spur us into action and make us realise that our procrastination isn’t justified, that there aren’t reasonable excuses for it, and it is better for us to take action now. [Look at the table for] examples of new helpful conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Truth</th>
<th>Helpful Conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am really tired</td>
<td>But I can still make a small start right now, and then rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t want to do it now</td>
<td>But later won’t be any better, so I may as well try to get started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will miss out on the fun happening now</td>
<td>But if I get some of it done, I can reward myself with other fun later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have everything I need</td>
<td>But I can still try to make a start on some bits of the task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have plenty of time</td>
<td>But better to get on top of it now than leave it to the last minute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t feel inspired</td>
<td>But if I get started, the inspiration may follow, I can’t just wait around for inspiration to arrive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have other things to do</td>
<td>But they are not more important and can be done after this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have enough time to get it all done</td>
<td>But that doesn’t mean I can’t get some of it done now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work better under pressure</td>
<td>But it is still worth making a start now, because if I leave things too late it can backfire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another way to change your conclusions is to test them out like any good scientist would if they had a theory or prediction.

Some of your excuses may be open to experimenting with to see if they really are true or you just think they are true. Here are some examples below, and you may be able to think of others.

- Fatigue, Motivation, Inspiration & Mood
- Lack of Resources
- Motivational Stress

[Consider the following excuses related to fatigue, motivation, inspiration, and mood:]

- “I am really tired, I am better off doing it after I have rested”
- “I don’t want to do it now, I may feel more like doing it tomorrow”
- “I don’t feel inspired, I will wait till I do”
- “I am not in the mood, I will wait till I am”

Each of these types of excuses rests on the idea that, if you don’t feel capable of doing it now, due to fatigue, lack of motivation, lack of inspiration or poor mood, it will somehow be better at another time in the future, so just wait for that time.

If these excuses apply to you, set yourself an experiment. Next time you find yourself making one of these excuses, rate on a 0-10 scale how fatigued or unmotivated or uninspired or poor your mood is before doing a task. Then set yourself a small amount of time and do the task (5 minutes, 10 minutes or 30 minutes – whatever seems like a reasonable and realistic starting point for you given how bad you feel). After working on the task for the set amount of time, re-rate how you feel (comparing it to your first rating), and reflect on what you have achieved in the short amount of time you have worked on the task.

You may then continue with the task for another set amount of time and again re-rate your feelings after that time.

Another experiment is to time how long it takes for you to naturally feel rested enough, motivated enough, inspired enough and in the mood enough to do a task. This will help you see if a ‘better time’ ever does emerge for you, and if so, how long it takes for it to eventuate.
It is important to do these types of experiments a number of times. Remember, to test a theory, a scientist wouldn’t just collect one sample, but a number of samples.

From these experiments, often people find they feel more energised, motivated, inspired or mood lifted once they have commenced a task, and the notion of a ‘better time’ in the future never really presents itself or, if it does, it is usually a long time coming. By doing these experiments, you can see what actually fits for you, rather than presuming it is best to postpone things due to fatigue, motivation, inspiration or mood.

[Now consider these excuses related to lack of resources:]

- “I don’t have everything I need, I will wait till I do”
- “I don’t have enough time to get it all done, I will wait till I have a lot of time to do it”

With these excuses, you demand that you need all the resources required before you can commence a task. So, to experiment, alternate between approaching tasks in two different ways. The first way, which we will call the all or nothing approach, is to wait till you have everything you need and enough time to complete a task before you get started. Doing things this way, you wait till you can do the task in one sitting. The second way, which we will call the bits and pieces approach, is to do what you can with the resources and time you have available, coming back to the task as more resources and more time becomes available. Doing things this way, you do the task in chunks. Alternate between these two approaches for a variety of tasks, and take note of how each approach makes you feel, how much you get done, and how quickly you get things done. Then compare approaches to see which works best for you. By doing these experiments, you can see what actually fits for you, rather than presuming it is best to postpone things until you have all the resources and time in the world.

[Finally, consider this excuse regarding motivational stress:]
- “I work better under pressure, so I will leave it to the last minute.”

With this excuse, you believe that pressure and stress is the key to accomplishing tasks. So, to experiment, alternate between approaching tasks in two different
Changing Procrastination

ways. The first way, which we will call the **last minute approach**, is to leave tasks until there is little time, you are under pressure to get it done in time, and you feel really stressed, and only then commence the task. The second way, which we will call the **ahead of time approach**, is to plan and work on tasks so they are completed well ahead of when they are due (e.g., at least 2 days before). Alternate between these two approaches for a variety of tasks, and take note of how each approach makes you feel, how much you get done, how quickly you get things done, the quality of your work, and whether you meet deadlines. Then compare approaches to see which works best for you. By doing these experiments, you can see what actually fits for you, rather than presuming it is best to postpone things until you are stressed.

Now that we have dealt with the excuses that lead to procrastination, the other type of self-talk that needs to be addressed to overcome procrastination are your self-criticisms.

When you criticise yourself for procrastinating, you just make it harder for yourself to get on top of things. The more you beat yourself down, the harder it is going to be to get back up and start doing.

Below are some common self-criticisms and the more motivational self-talk that could be used instead. Notice that what is important about the motivational self-talk is that it separates your behaviour of not getting something done from who you are as a person and your personal qualities (i.e., the behaviour of not starting a task does not mean a person possesses the quality of laziness). Also, the motivational self-talk focuses on what can be done from here on in, rather than dwelling on what hasn’t been done. You can’t change the past, but you can change the now and the future. Finally, the more motivational self-talk gets rid of “I have to,” “I should,” and “I must,” replacing them with things like, “I choose,” “I would prefer,” [and] “I will.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Self-Critical Self-Talk</strong></th>
<th><strong>Motivational Self-Talk</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have to get this done. Suck it up and get going loser!</td>
<td>I choose to work on this task. I know I can get it done if I just focus on the one thing at a time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I should be finished by now. If I can't even do this I must be a real idiot!</td>
<td>I would prefer to be finished by now. But let's focus on what I can do to get closer to the finish line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I must finish this. Come on stupid...think!</td>
<td>I will finish this. It is just going to take a bit more time. Let's plan how to get it done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can't believe I haven't started yet. I must be so lazy!</td>
<td>Just focus on getting started. Just because I haven't started, doesn't mean anything bad about me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Come on! Others can get it done faster than this — I must be a complete moron!

What others do is of no concern. Focusing on what I am doing and my task is more helpful.

**Resources**

“Which dog are you feeding”

Self-Compassion: a Healthier Way of Relating to Yourself

Start taking time to notice your most common self-criticisms and jot them down [in the Self-Talk Table in your workbook].

That is, tune into that self-talk that puts you down for not having achieved things, particularly for the task/goal you have chosen to work on... I know tuning into this can be painful, but you do so with the aim of changing it for the better. For each self-criticism you notice, jot down a more motivational way of talking to yourself. Use the examples to give you some ideas. Also, if you struggle with thinking of something encouraging to say to yourself, imagine that a friend of yours was using these self-criticisms on themselves, and write down what you would say to them to encourage and motivate them to move forward with a task. We are often good at being motivational and encouraging towards others, but less good at doing it for ourselves. So, the aim is to practice talking to and treating ourselves as we would a friend.

Next time you notice yourself using one of your self-criticisms, ask yourself, “How is criticising myself helping me get the job done?” and “What is a more motivating way to speak to myself to help me get the job done?” You may then say to yourself the more motivational statements you have come up with as a way of encouraging yourself to get going and doing. If you criticise yourself a lot, it may be helpful to write down your motivational self-talk on a small card and carry it with you... You won’t be used to talking to yourself in an encouraging way, so you may need these prompts and reminders.

As we have seen already, understanding procrastination and using helpful self-talk to overcome procrastination are both very important. But, at the end of the day, it is taking action that needs to happen. You may be familiar with the phrase “Just Do It.” Ultimately that is what needs to happen to stop your procrastination, but it is easier said than done... [The] practical strategies [that follow] will help you get going and will also address any weakness you may
have in skills like organisation, time management, managing your environment and the way you approach tasks, which may be contributing to your procrastination.

**Resources**

“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook

The first practical step to overcoming procrastination is being very clear about what needs to be done.

If this is all hazy, then it is going to be very hard to get started. If the task is big or you have many tasks, you won’t know where to start. If the task is small, you may be thinking it is worse than it really is. Being clear about what you need to do will bring you one step closer to doing, as you will know exactly what you are up against, and hence have a better idea about how to proceed...

**Prioritise**

Firstly, write a ‘To Do’ list of the tasks and goals you need to work on. This could be a list for the day, the week, the month, or longer, depending on what makes most sense for your circumstances. You may have more than one list, for example a longer-term list for the month and a short-term list for each day. Depending on your situation you may have lots of things on your list, or just one big thing that you have been putting off. When you stand back and look at the list(s), think how realistic it is to achieve these things in the time allocated. If it isn’t realistic, see which tasks or goals can be postponed and revisited at a later date.

With your remaining list of activities it is now important to prioritise. Order them from 1 onwards as to what things need to be done first and foremost, then what next, and what can be done later down the track. That way, you will know where to start, not based on what you feel like doing, but instead based on what is most urgent and important.
Grade
The next step is to grade each task. What we mean by grade is to break the task into all the small steps that are involved in achieving the task. That way you break the task into ‘chunks.’ This works well in the sense that, if it is a large task and you don’t know where to start, grading the task into its component steps can make it seem less overwhelming. Alternatively, if it is a small task, when you go to grade it you may see there isn’t much to it, and this may motivate you to get it over and done with. When you grade a task, think of the first step, and then work forward through the series of steps involved until the task is completed. Include all the steps – big, medium and small. For the big steps, see if there is any way you can break them down further if they seem too big.

Tell Time
People who procrastinate are often not very good at telling time. What we mean by this is that they may underestimate how long something will take them, and hence do not allocate enough time and so things don’t get done or are late. They may also overestimate how long something will take them, and hence make the task a far bigger deal than it really is, which puts them off doing it. Improving your time telling by practicing estimating how long something takes can be helpful. You can do this by starting to keep a record of tasks you regularly have problems with because you either underestimate or overestimate the time required to do these tasks. Actually time how long it does take you to do these things and keep a record. Once your time telling has improved, you can then make more accurate estimates of how long each step of each task will take you.

Now that you know exactly what needs to be done, you can focus on the best way to approach each step involved in completing your tasks or goals.

The overall aim is to take it one step at a time. However, there are a number of different possibilities for approaching each step of a task or goal, and there is no one right way. Below are some suggestions of different approaches you can try. Some of these approaches will be more suited to certain types of tasks and less relevant for other types of tasks. Try them on for size and see which you like the most.

Worst–First
One option is to knock out the worst task first. If there is something you are dreading, get it over and done with first, and then all the other things you need to do will seem like a breeze after that. This works particularly well for small but dreaded tasks (e.g., phoning someone you don’t want to speak to).

Using Momentum
Another option is to start doing a task that you like and that energises you, and then without a break, quickly switch to a task that you have been putting off. The idea is to use the motivation and momentum you get from the task you like
Sleep, Eat & Exercise

A really useful approach for getting started on tasks is to plan to spend just 5 minutes on the task. This is such a small amount of time, so you will feel you can tolerate just 5 minutes. At the end of the 5 minutes, reassess and see if you can spend just another 5 minutes on the task, and so on. You may decide to make the chunks of time a little larger (i.e., 10 minutes or 15 minutes), if this seems more reasonable for you. The idea being, set just a small amount of time to get started on a task, at the end of which you see if you can go just another small amount of time more. You will be surprised at just how much you are able to extend your time working on a task once you have gotten the ball rolling.

Just 5 Minutes

Set Time Limits

A different approach is to set a specific amount of time to work on a task, and stick to just that rather than extending things, even if you feel you can. If you know in the back of your mind that you are going to expect yourself to do more when the time is up, it may stop you from starting in the first place, as it can feel like you are just trying to trick yourself. Whereas, if you know you only need to do 30 minutes and that is it, regardless of whether you feel like doing more, you may be more willing to get going.

Prime Time

Choosing the right time of day to approach a task can be helpful too. You might need to work out what time of day you are most productive or energised or creative. The idea is to attempt tasks when you are at your optimum. You may be a ‘night person,’ a ‘morning person’ or a ‘middle of the day’ kind of person. Also, there may be different times of day that are better suited for different types of tasks. For example, all the ‘dry’ tasks (e.g., household chores) you may be better at tackling in the morning, and ‘creative’ tasks (e.g., painting or drawing) you may be better with at night. Another example is that you may find it easier to follow through with a new exercise routine in the morning compared to
the end of the day, or vice versa. The important thing is to become aware of what time of day works best for you, and seize those moments to get going.

**Prime Place**
It is also important to choose the right place to attempt a task. You need to be aware of what types of environments you get more done in and what types of environments have distractions that make you more likely to procrastinate. For example, trying to get a task done while there are lots of people around means there is the potential for social distractions, which isn't going to help you get going. Therefore, you may need to isolate yourself for a set period of time in order to get work done. In addition, attempting tasks whilst there are other distractions within arms reach (e.g., TV, fridge, telephone, etc.) is just teasing yourself and tempting procrastination. Hence, seek out environments you can work in with minimal distractions (e.g., the library versus your home, your desk versus the loungeroom or your bed, etc.).

**Remember-Then-Do**
For small irritating tasks that often slip your mind, a good strategy is that, as soon as you remember you need to do the task, seize that moment to follow through. Rather than putting it off and forgetting about it again, use your remembering of the task as a sign to take action now.

**Reminders**
If forgetting tasks is a big part of why you procrastinate, use visual reminders and prompts to help you. If the things you need to get done aren't 'in your face,' then it will be a case of 'out of sight, out of mind.' So, take steps to make sure that the tasks you need to get done are 'in your face.' This could involve writing notes or lists and placing them in prominent places (e.g., fridge, bedside table, bathroom mirror, desk, diary) or using other reminders (e.g., mobile phone, email manager, asking someone else to remind you).

**Visualise**
Another way to approach your tasks or goals is to first visualise doing them. If you are good with imagery, bring to mind a very vivid and real picture of doing the task. Try to use all your senses to make the image as real as possible. In this image, notice any obstacles coming up that get in the way of the task, and...
visualise yourself successfully overcoming those obstacles and following through with the task to completion. In the image, focus particularly on the good feeling you have when the task is complete. Once the task is successfully completed in your mind, use the momentum from the visualisation to get going on the task in real life.

**Focus**

If you are feeling unsettled when sitting down to commence a task, take a moment to close your eyes and focus on your breath. Try to lengthen each breath in and each breath out. Slow your breath down to smooth, slow and steady breathing. Take in normal and comfortable volumes of air, and try to allow yourself to breathe from deep in the lungs and belly, rather than shallow in your chest. Just focus on the breath. It may even be helpful to count your breath to yourself (e.g., “breathing in-2-3-4...hold...breathing out 2-3-4-5-6”), counting whatever rhythm feels comfortable to you. Spend 5-10 minutes using your breath to settle and focus, and then return to the task. Any time you notice yourself becoming unsettled, again just focus on a couple of slow and smooth breaths. Just observe the unsettled feeling, rather than being irritated by it. Let go of the feeling by imagining each exhalation as carrying that unsettledness away from the body as the breath leaves the body.

**Plan Rewards**

A really important part of approaching tasks and goals in a productive way is to actually plan rewards and ‘play time.’ Often, the things we could use to reward ourselves (e.g., pleasure, socialising) are the very same things that distract us and get us procrastinating in the first place, and hence make us feel guilty. But, there is a difference between these activities interfering and distracting us from what needs to be done, and instead using them to reward ourselves after something has been achieved or as a well earned break from a task. The more you plan regular rewards for your achievements, the less you will feel like you are missing out or being deprived of something, and hence the less likely it is that you will procrastinate. The key is to let these rewards be guilt-free by having pre-planned them and fitted them around the work that needs to be done. People will often think “I don’t have time” or “I don’t deserve rewards or fun.” But think of it this way, the things you don’t like doing tend to zap some of your energy, whereas rewards, leisure and pleasure help replenish your energy, allowing you to do better quality work in the long run. It is all about a balance between pleasure and achievement. When you are a procrastinator, the
balance is out, in that there is more pleasure (often guilty pleasure) and little achievement. The aim with overcoming procrastination is not for it to be all about achievement and no pleasure, as that doesn’t lead to a good life. Instead, finding the balance between pleasure and achievement is the key to being a ‘doer’ rather than a ‘procrastinator.’

…Now that you know what needs to be done and have some ways of approaching the tasks and goals you need to do, the final practical way to overcome procrastination is to identify when to do it.

This involves having some routine, and hence an idea of where the tasks you have been putting off can slot into your routine. It is about…allocating time to work on tasks or goals. There are two ways you can do this, to schedule or to unschedule your tasks and goals. You may want to try both ways and see which works best for you.

**Scheduling is like keeping a detailed diary.**

It involves making a plan for what will be done at what point in your day or week. [In your workbook,] you can see an example of how to use a schedule for your week. Notice how this person’s existing routine and commitments have been scheduled into the week (e.g., breakfast, work, catching the bus, lunch, dinner, appointments, social outings, etc.). Also included is a plan of when to do the steps for each of the tasks and goals they have been procrastinating on… Notice how when you schedule your week, you make a decision about the specific time you are going to do things; this way your week is well planned and you know exactly when you will fit in the things you have been putting off.

The upside of scheduling is that you have a detailed plan in place to follow, and you know exactly what needs to be done when. However, there can be some downsides for some people. One downside is if spontaneous events interfere with the plan. If something interrupts the plan, some people find it hard to be flexible and get back on track with the schedule. Also, some people can feel like their week is too planned and regimented and may resent this. In addition, if you don’t happen to do a task or goal at the set time you planned for whatever reason, some people can feel like they have “failed” at the schedule and may give up altogether. If you find that these problems apply to you when you try scheduling your week, you may want to try using the unschedule (Fiore, 1989).

**Resources**

“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook:

[http://www.ritechhub.umn.edu/Resources/SEE/ProcrastinationWorkbook.pdf](http://www.ritechhub.umn.edu/Resources/SEE/ProcrastinationWorkbook.pdf)
The unschedule shares some similarities with scheduling in that you use the same format to schedule in any existing commitments or usual routine, that is, the things you know will happen in your week. However, the key difference is that you don’t write in when you plan to do the tasks and goals you have set yourself that you had been procrastinating on. Instead, by having scheduled your existing commitments, you will now be able to see where you have space in your week to fit other things. The unschedule will help you see where you have blocks of time to devote to the tasks and goals you have been putting off. Then, when one of these blocks of time presents itself, you can go to your prioritised and graded list of tasks and goals and decide what you are going to work on during this time. Once you have worked solidly on a task or goal for 30 minutes, mark it into your schedule. Then, if you have worked for another solid 30 minutes, mark that in too. That is, you mark in each 30-minute block of time you spend working on your tasks and goals after you have done it. Doing things this way, you can’t fail at the unschedule, as no specific target has been set. In addition, interruptions are more easily accommodated, and you feel like there is some spontaneity in your week. At the end of each day or week, you can look back and see how much time you have devoted to doing things you have been procrastinating about by looking at the blocks of time you have marked off. [Your workbook] shows an example of what an unschedule might look like.

The main thing is to give scheduling a go, whether it be using a more fixed method (i.e., planning specific tasks for specific times in your week) or unfixed method (e.g., being aware of when you have blocks of time in your routine to devote to tasks and goals and marking off the time you have worked on these). [Your workbook contains] a blank schedule so you can experiment with each method for the tasks and goals you have been working on.

Resources
“Put Off Procrastinating" Workbook

Below are some practical tips that may be helpful in getting you going and following through on tasks.

Self-Monitoring
Similar to marking in the blocks of time you have worked in the unschedule, self-monitoring is the process of recognising and recording what you have achieved. So, when you have accomplished some work on a task or completed a task, mark it in on your unschedule, tick it off on your schedule, or tick it off your initial list of tasks and goals you created. Don’t let these things go unnoticed or get swept under the carpet, but instead acknowledge your achievements by having some record of what you have done. It is amazing how something as simple as merely crossing a task off your ‘To Do List’ can make you feel really good and keep you doing more.
Telling Someone

Another tip is to tell someone you trust that you are aiming to complete certain tasks or goals. Telling someone has three aims. Firstly, when you tell other people, it signifies a more serious commitment that you are going to follow through on things compared to when you do things in secret. Secondly, having another person check in with how you are doing can be motivating, as it makes you feel accountable to someone other than yourself. Finally, if you are struggling, then that person can be someone you can gain support from in tough times.

Assertiveness

Another thing to consider is whether a lack of assertiveness is getting in the way of you overcoming your procrastination. For example, if you are unassertive you may find it difficult to say “no.” This may mean that you take on unnecessary tasks, which lessens the time you have available for the real priority tasks and goals you need to be working on. Another example is you may find it difficult to make requests of others, such as telling people you need some time alone to work on something important. As such, this may keep any social distractions going that interfere with working on your tasks and goals.

Assertiveness is a skill that takes some time and practice to develop. It involves recognising you have the right to say ‘no’ and make reasonable requests in a way that is respectful to both yourself and others. It involves not just what you say (e.g., “I am unable to do that job for you at the moment, is there someone else you could give it to?” or “I really need some time alone to work on this right now, but I would love to catch up with you afterwards”) but how you say it (e.g., clear and confident tone of voice, direct but calm style, making eye contact, standing straight, listening to others, etc.). If you struggle with these types of things, you may want to refer to the [resources tab below for resources] to help you deal with this issue in more detail.

Community Resources
Student Counseling Services
Campus Heath Center Mental Health Clinic

Resources
“Your Perfect Right: Assertiveness and Equality in Your Life and Relationships” by Robert Alberti and Michael Emmons:
Self-monitoring App
Remember Win: An App to Track Your Accomplishments

Given you know how to dismiss your procrastination excuses and have some real practical strategies for tackling your procrastination behavior, you now have the key things you need to overcome procrastinating and start doing.

However, you may still wish to tackle the underlying reasons for your procrastination. As we have emphasised before, doing this is not always necessary to beat the habit of procrastination. However, it can have its benefits.

The important thing to remember is that the underlying reasons for your procrastination are harder to shift and may require more intensive work with a mental health professional who specialises in cognitive-behavioural therapy. [On the following pages] are some tips to get you started, to give you a feel for what you need to do to overcome your unhelpful rules and assumptions and your intolerance of discomfort, which are the real reasons for your procrastination. For some people, the tips...may be enough. However, for others this...will at least give you a sense of whether you want to pursue this type of work further with a professional.

Community Resources
Campus Heath Center Mental Health Clinic:
Student Counseling Services: https://counseling.umn.edu/ Academic Counseling

Resource
National Board for Certified Counselors: Counselor Finder

There are...steps you can go through to challenge the unhelpful rules and assumptions that give rise to your procrastination. These steps include:

• clearly identifying what your unhelpful rule or assumption is and recognising where it might have come from;
• questioning whether your unhelpful rule or assumption is reasonable, realistic, fair, or helpful, and recognising the negative consequences of having this unhelpful rule or assumption;
• identifying a more helpful rule or assumption you could
try to adopt; and
- planning how you would need to act in every day life to put this new helpful rule or assumption into practice.

When working out where your rules and assumptions might have come from, this will often involve messages or sayings you have received from others around you, past experiences you have had, or how you have observed others approach life. Often these things will have occurred whilst growing up, but can also come from more recent experiences. When generating a more helpful rule or assumption, this involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is more balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of affairs. When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, this involves working out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to take it on board and believe it.

[In your workbook is an Adjusting Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions] worksheet to guide you through each of the steps, so you can adjust the unhelpful rule or assumption that has been interfering with the tasks or goals you have been working on. If you have identified more than one unhelpful rule or assumption, then you will need to tackle each, one at a time. [Also included] are some examples of how to go through the steps to adjust each unhelpful rule and assumption identified [earlier] as most common to procrastination.

**Resources**

“Put Off Procrastination” Workbook

As has been highlighted...your unhelpful rules and assumptions when activated, tend to generate some form of discomfort about doing a task or goal.

Now, if you particularly hate, detest or can’t stand discomfort, you are going to be more likely to procrastinate as a way of avoiding the discomfort. This puts you in a mode where you are ‘discomfort driven,’ that is, you react from your discomfort, and it is your discomfort that guides your behaviour and calls all the shots.

Not being able to stand discomfort is often referred to as being ‘discomfort intolerant.’ Hence, something that can be helpful...
when addressing procrastination is to increase your tolerance for discomfort. That is, to adopt the attitude that “I don’t like discomfort, but I can stand it, I can stay with it, and I can get through it...I can tolerate it!!!!” If you can adopt this attitude, you will be less tempted to turn to procrastination as a way of stopping the discomfort.

Below are some suggestions you can practice to increase your ability to tolerate discomfort.

These suggestions come from mindfulness meditation principles. Mindfulness involves being in the present moment and being a non-judgemental observer of your experience. So when it comes to discomfort, it means that you observe the discomfort in a detached manner, without trying to change it or buy into it, without struggling with it or trying to get rid of it, but just watching it as it is. Often when people do this, they find that paradoxically it lessens how uncomfortable they feel and allows them to feel they can tolerate their discomfort. Now, mindfulness and tolerating discomfort is a skill, and like any skill it requires practice. The more practice, the better you will get at it. Don’t expect it to work overnight, as you will need to persist and stick with it. It may also be a good idea to practice the art of just watching your experience in the present moment when you are not distressed, so you will be better practiced at using this approach when you are distressed, which can be harder to do.

Be Aware

Firstly, bring a gentle awareness to what it is that you are experiencing right now in the present moment. If you are practicing when you are not distressed, this may be noticing your breath, noticing sensations in your body, noticing sensations outside your body as it makes contact with the surrounding environment, noticing sounds around you, noticing sights around you, noticing something you are tasting, noticing emotions you are experiencing, or noticing thoughts that are popping into your mind. Bring awareness to anything sensory that is happening right now.

If you are distressed when practicing, notice and bring awareness to the discomfort itself, whether it be anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion, etc.
Watch, Observe, No-Judgement

Once aware of your experience, adopt the stance of being an observer or watcher of your experience. An observer or watcher doesn’t try to change what is happening, but at the same time doesn’t get ‘caught up’ nor ‘buy into’ what is happening. They just stand at a distance from the action...just watching. Try to be a non-judgemental observer, that is, not to judge your experience as either good or bad, it is what it is. To help you be non-judgemental in your watching, it can be helpful to label your experience like..."here is a thought," or "here is a body sensation," or "here is a feeling," etc. For example, thinking, “I am not doing this mindfulness practice right” would be a judgement; instead labelling that as “just a thought” is taking a non-judgemental attitude.

Again, if you are distressed when practicing, just watch and observe in a non-judgemental way your discomfort. You might use labels like..."here is the feeling of anger," “here is the feeling of boredom,” “here is the feeling of despair,” and so on. Try to relate to them as “just feelings, nothing more and nothing less.” Remind yourself that “you are not your feelings,” and that “you are bigger than your feelings.” If thoughts like, “I can’t stand this feeling” pop up, again just watch it as "a mere thought."

Let Go

If you allow your experience to just be as it is, chances are that because you have let it come into your space (rather than having battled and struggled with it), it will then be able to go and leave your space in its own time. To help you with this, you might try using your breath to let go. Breathe from wherever you feel the discomfort within you. Breathe into the discomfort, making a space for it and allowing it to be there. You may then be able to watch the discomfort leave with your breath, each time you exhale. If the discomfort does move on, it doesn’t mean it won’t come back. When the discomfort does rear its head again, know that it is OK, and again just bring awareness to it, watch and observe it in a non-judgemental fashion, and then allow it to leave again when it is ready.

Community Resources

Introduction to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
Living on Purpose: An Exploration of Self, Purpose, and Community:
Art of Healing: Self as Healer
Spirituality and Resilience
Meditation: Integrating Body and Mind
Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Classes

Resources

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Videos
Ride the Wave of Discomfort
Similar to mindfulness is riding the wave of discomfort. Our emotions usually act like waves, rising and gaining height at certain points, then tapering off and dropping back, then sometimes gradually rising again. Imagine your discomfort as a wave. Like a wave, the discomfort is temporary, it doesn’t go on forever, and at some point will slowly subside. Imagine yourself riding the wave like a surfer until you come into shore, or imagine yourself bobbing gently in the ocean with each wave that rolls in, being carried upwards at certain points and gently back down again. If you can relate to your discomfort as a wave that rises and falls, then you may feel more able to tolerate it, as you know it won’t go on forever, and you will come down the other side of the wave eventually.

Gradually Delay Procrastination & Increase Discomfort
Another option for increasing your ability to tolerate discomfort is to gradually increase the amount of time you experience discomfort prior to procrastinating. In other words, delaying procrastination and hence increasing your time sitting with discomfort. For example, if the discomfort you detest is boredom, and procrastination is your way of escaping boredom, pick a specific amount of time for which you are going to allow yourself to experience the boredom
before procrastinating. Initially 10 minutes may be all you can stand, then increase the time to 15 minutes, then 20 minutes, and so on. The idea being to gradually increase the amount of time you expose yourself to your own discomfort, gradually building up a tolerance each time.

**We are at the end of our journey to conquering procrastination.**

It is now time to take stock and see how far we have come. It is time to put together all you have learned so you have a clear ‘road map’ of how to continue this journey and how to keep on track. Remember, as we have kept saying, procrastination is a habit, and like anything, it will take time, practice and persistence to kick the habit. So, let’s look at what you need to keep doing.

Remember the procrastination cycle introduced in [the last lesson]? [In the resources tab] below is a simplified version to refresh your memory.

**We have learnt that procrastination is driven by our unhelpful rules and assumptions about what we expect of ourselves and the world, which lead us to feel some sort of discomfort about doing a task or goal we are faced with.**

If we can’t tolerate this discomfort, we will be likely to use procrastination as our way of avoiding or stopping the discomfort. In addition, if we can come up with convincing excuses and justifications for our procrastination, we will be all the more likely to travel the path of procrastination. When we procrastinate, we find substitute activities for the tasks and goals we need to be doing, which tend to be pleasurable or distracting to us. In turn, the consequences that arise from our procrastination, whether they be positive or negative, make us more likely to turn to procrastination next time we are faced with a similar task or goal.

The **Procrastination Cycle** shows us that procrastination can be like a vicious negative spiral that we get stuck in. The good thing about a cycle is that usually we can reverse it from a negative cycle to a more positive cycle. It is like spinning a wheel. The wheel may be moving in one direction and can have quite a bit of momentum behind it. But, by making some changes in how we spin the wheel, we can usually get it to spin in the opposite direction. Now, initially when we try to change the direction of the wheel, it can be a real effort and the change may not be smooth at first. However, with some persistence, it starts to get easier and the wheel eventually gathers momentum in this new direction. Your procrastination habit can be a bit like trying to change the direction of the spinning wheel. Initially you are stuck in a negative procrastination cycle, so it will take some effort and persistence to reverse the cycle to a more positive ‘doing’ cycle. But, once you change the cycle, it will gather its own momentum in a positive direction.

**Resources**

The Procrastination Cycle Revisited
So, let’s reflect on what we have learned about how to change the procrastination cycle and look at a cycle of ‘doing’ rather than ‘procrastinating.’

The ‘Doing’ Cycle [in your workbook] draws together all the things you have learned in the ‘Put Off Procrastinating’ [lessons].

Notice from the cycle that we would still expect our old unhelpful rules and assumptions to be activated when faced with certain tasks or goals. Our unhelpful rules and assumptions have generally been around for a long time, so we can’t expect them to disappear overnight. The key thing is that instead of being led by these unhelpful rules and assumptions, we choose to do things differently at this point, which puts us on the path to ‘doing’ rather than procrastinating.

Over time, these unhelpful rules and assumptions may relax and may not be as easily activated.

So when our old unhelpful rules and assumptions are activated, we instead:

- Adjust our unhelpful rules and assumptions by challenging them, devising new helpful rules and assumptions, and putting these into practice;
- Practice tolerating discomfort using mindfulness techniques (i.e., being aware, watching and observing without judgement, and letting go) and gradually increasing our time sitting with discomfort;
- Dismiss our procrastination excuses by challenging and testing any unhelpful conclusions we hold about being better off postponing a task or goal to another time, and instead developing more helpful conclusions that it is best for us to make a start on things now;
- Use motivational self-talk rather than self-criticism to encourage ourselves to do the task;
- Put into action practical strategies to stop procrastination, such as prioritise, grade, tell time, worst-first, using momentum, just 5 minutes, set time limits, prime time, prime place, remember-then-do, reminders, visualise, focus, plan rewards, schedule and unschedule.

Doing each of these things should then lead us to follow through with the task or goal, which will carry with it certain consequences which make us more likely to keep doing rather than return to our old ways of procrastinating. These consequences might include getting things done, achievement, satisfaction, belief in ourselves and our abilities, ultimately less discomfort and stress, and
some sort of reward for our accomplishments. The key thing is that, by doing rather than procrastinating, our unhelpful rules and assumptions are challenged because we see we can do these things and can cope whatever the outcome.

**Resources**

"Put Off Procrastinating" Workbook:

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**The Doing Cycle**

Learn how to follow a cycle of doing or visit the link directly by returning to page 33 of the online lessons.

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Based on the ‘Doing’ Cycle, it can be helpful for us to draw up a clear plan of action for what it is we need to do when the urge to procrastinate arises.

Below are the 6 steps to get on top of your procrastination any time you feel it is getting the better of you. Notice steps 2 and 3 are optional because, as we have kept saying, you don’t necessarily have to tackle the harder underlying reasons for your procrastination…to be able to overcome procrastination.

**Step 1. Being Aware & Non-Blaming**

The first step is to stop and recognize your urge to procrastinate. That is, be aware and reflect on how the procrastination cycle is playing out in your life right now with the task or goal that faces you. However, when you do recognise that you are procrastinating or you are having the urge to procrastinate, do so in a non-judgemental and non-blaming way. Don’t beat yourself up for it, but instead recognise that procrastination has arrived and that you are going to make a choice to do things differently.

**Step 2 (Optional). Adjust Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions**

If you can recognise the unhelpful rule or assumption of yours that is being activated by your task or goal, you can make attempts to adjust this. You can do this by challenging the rule or assumption; questioning where it came from, how it is unreasonable, unrealistic, unfair, or unhelpful; and identifying its negative consequences. Then you can think of a new more helpful rule or assumption and what you would need to do to put it into practice in this situation.

**Step 3 (Optional). Practice Tolerating Discomfort**

If you can recognise the discomfort that is arising within you about doing the task or goal, you can practice tolerating it mindfully by just being aware and observing or watching the discomfort without judgement, making space for it, and hence letting it go when it’s ready. You could imagine riding the wave of your discomfort or delaying procrastination to give yourself time to practice...
sitting with the discomfort.

**Step 4. Dismiss Procrastination Excuses & Encourage**

Look for the excuses you are making to justify your procrastination. Notice your old unhelpful conclusions, such as not needing to do the task now because of some circumstance. Dispute if this conclusion really is true by asking:

- What is the evidence or reasons?
- Am I really going to be better off?
- Is it really true I can’t get started?
- What will the consequences be?

Also, is there a way to test if your conclusion is true, rather than assuming it is? And, finally, settle on a conclusion that is more helpful to you, something more along the line that you can make some small start now! Drop any self-criticisms and instead talk to yourself as if you were motivating and encouraging a friend.

**Step 5. Carry Out Practical Strategies**

Decide on the practical strategies most relevant to the task or goal at hand and apply these practical strategies. Remember, to gain clarity as to exactly what needs to be done, write a list of tasks and goals, then prioritise these, then grade each, and then accurately estimate how much time each step of each task or goal will take. There are numerous ways you can approach any given step of a task, such as worst-first, using momentum, just 5 minutes, set time limits, prime time, prime place, remember-then-do, reminders, visualise, focus, and plan rewards. To know when you have the time to attempt a step of the task, you can use a schedule or an unschedule.

**Step 6. Reflect & Revise Plan**

Now, step back and reflect on how you are doing. Examine how things are going. Appreciate what is working well and the positive consequences of doing rather than procrastinating. Also recognise what areas may need some improvement. If something does need to be revised, revisit steps 1-5, and try again.

[In your workbook] is an example Procrastination Action Plan, which takes you through the 6 steps using the procrastination example discussed earlier... [Also] is a blank sheet so you can work through your own task or goal in the same way.

**Resources**

“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook
Congratulations for making it to the end!

Now, at the end of the day, the important thing is to keep going! Expect that changing your procrastination habit will take time, practice, persistence and patience. Expect that you will have good days and bad. Expect you will have days you feel like ‘doer,’ and days you feel like you have slipped back into ‘procrastinationville.’ The old saying of “two steps forward, one step back” is very true. If you expect setbacks when you sign up for the journey of changing your procrastination, then when you face a bump in the road, you will be less likely to blame yourself and give up. As such, you will be better able to use the action plan just covered to help you get over that bump and keep moving full steam ahead!

Don’t give up!

If you are struggling, find someone who can support you through making these changes. Revisit the earlier ‘Put Off Procrastinating’ [material], particularly the ‘Do I Want To Change?’ section [on page 4]... This will remind you of your commitment and motivation to overcoming procrastination, as well as help you work through any roadblocks that are making it tough to change your procrastination.

Another way to help you maintain your gains is to recognise the changes you have made and your achievements. If we ignore these things, we tend to think we haven’t changed at all or that change hasn’t been worth it, and we will be less likely to keep going. Take time...to write down and appreciate what changes you have made [in the Maintaining Your Gains Table in your workbook]... Also, recognise the positive benefits that have come from changing, that is, how your life is better. Keep coming back to this and adding in more changes or benefits that arise as you continue on your journey of transforming yourself from ‘procrastinator’ to ‘doer.’

Resources
“Put Off Procrastinating” Workbook
Self-monitoring App
Remember Win: An App to Track Your Accomplishments