

## Handout 7: Practical Tips & Techniques for Reducing Procrastination

Procrastination and perfectionism are strongly linked. Procrastination can increase your perfectionism and intensify self evaluation based on achievement.

Below are some practical tips and techniques that might be good starting points to help you reduce and overcome your procrastination.

### **Breaking Tasks down into Manageable Chunks**

This technique involves thinking of a sequence of little tasks, some easier than others, rather than just one big task that is daunting and seems overwhelming, so you procrastinate rather than getting started.

The idea is to think about that the goal / task is that you want to achieve. Then think of all the steps that need to be completed towards the goal, and break down the task into manageable chunks, rating them for difficulty. Then get started on one of the easier steps.

For example:

#### **Step 1: Define the task / goal**

***Clean my flat***

#### **Step 2: Break the task down in to manageable chunks and rate chunks from easiest to hardest (0 – 100).**

- 0 – think about cleaning my flat
- 10 – write list of tasks to be done for cleaning my flat
- 20 – Put away clothes in my bedroom
- 30 – Vacuum bedroom
- 40 – Vacuum hallway and lounge
- 50 - Clear items from floor & couch in the lounge
- 60 – Clear books, papers & objects off dining room table
- 70 – Put away books and papers in study
- 80 – Wash dishes
- 90 – Mop kitchen floor
- 100 – Clean the bath



The key is to make each step a manageable chunk that you will be able to achieve, and to build in rest and rewards for yourself in between the steps!

### **Just 5-Minutes**

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 re-assess 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 is to just a small amount of time to get started on a task, at the end of which 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 got the ball rolling!



### **Worst-First**

Another 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 tip 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 (e.g., cooking), to help you get through the task you don't like (e.g., cleaning the fridge out).



### **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 lounge 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.

### **Mindful 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. 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 your diaphragm, 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. Anytime 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 ac and ‘play time’. Often the things we could use to reward ourselves (e.g., pleasure, 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 you 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’.

### **Top Tips:**

#### **One Manageable Step at a Time**

Doing a task may seem like a huge effort when you think about everything you have to do. If you break them down into much smaller stages they may seem less daunting.

Have a go at doing things in manageable steps. Think of a job that you have been putting off. If you can, break it down into even smaller parts. Then take the smallest bit first and do that. Just start to have a go at it and see what happens.



#### **Motivation follows Action!**

Motivation can be a problem – we might not feel like doing anything. However, once we do make a start then we often feel like we want to do a little bit more. If we wait until we feel like doing something before we start, then we may wait for a very long time!



Remember: motivation doesn't create itself. Motivation is a muscle, you have to start using it for it to grow stronger and become easier. Think of strengthening a physical muscle at the gym....it is hard at the beginning, but if we keep going, exercising becomes easier because our muscles get stronger. The more we do, the more motivated we feel and the easier it becomes to get things done.