

Procrastination and Low Motivation

Procrastination and/or low motivation is something that seems to bother a lot of people, especially those taking exams! It can become so troubling that it often turns up as an issue in counselling.

What are the causes? Be honest – notice which ones apply to you!

Boredom

Humans are intelligent, sentient beings and mostly try to avoid being bored. If you find your work boring, then you are likely to avoid it. This is often the case when it comes to revision.

Fear of failure

On the whole, humans don't enjoy failing at things so if you're worried that you won't do well at something, you may tend to put it off.

Fear of unpleasantness

If they know that something is likely to be unpleasant, humans often try to avoid it, whether it's a filling at the dentist or doing a difficult maths problem.

An overriding need for leisure/pleasure

Humans need downtime. They cannot work all the time and remain healthy. Hence, some people procrastinate about going to bed. They've worked so hard all day that they are determined to have some leisure time. Hence, they stay up late, having some fun, even if it's only watching re-runs of movies they've seen endless times before. Alternatively, they put off vital tasks in their evenings or weekends because they've been over-working in the daytime or week.

Tiredness

When humans are tired, they are less likely to make good decisions and have less energy to give to staying on task. Therefore, they tend to drift and it feels like it doesn't matter. They are also likely to get more bored because they cannot focus or engage so well. School pupils may drift off in lessons and lose the thread, thus creating more risk of boredom.

Poor risk management/assessment

It is well-established that teenagers don't assess and manage risk well. The risks and consequences of procrastination therefore don't make much impact on them. It feels like it doesn't matter – there is plenty of time to catch up – when, in fact, there isn't and the consequences could be life-changing.

'Spoilt Child Syndrome'

Children who are always given exactly what they want on demand, never learn to manage difficulty or lack of the self-control/will-power to do something that might be good for them later, even though it isn't very pleasant at the time. They can easily become big procrastinators because they simply haven't developed the self-discipline to put up with anything unpleasant in order to get a beneficial result.

Perfectionism

If you are a perfectionist, you may well start carrying out 'avoidance' behaviours. Procrastination is one of them. If you are worried that whatever the task you face will be very difficult to carry out to your own exacting standards, then it is easy to start avoiding such tasks completely. If you don't

start, you don't run the risk of imperfection! Alternatively, if the task seems enormous because you know you'll spend ages checking and re-checking that it's perfect, then it's very hard to start.

What to do about it

Whatever the cause, this TED talk is very entertaining and will help you feel less alone!

https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_urban_inside_the_mind_of_a_master_procrastinator?..

It doesn't have much in the way of solutions, but it identifies the problem very clearly. As explained in the talk, your task, whatever the cause, is to get your Instant Gratification Monkey under control and keep him or her out of the Dark Playground! (I love that term – it's where you spend all the time that you're procrastinating. It's 'dark' fun because you're hoping nobody notices, including yourself!)

OK, so what are YOU going to do about it?

Boredom

First off, if there's a subject that you've realised is a bad choice and it's early enough to change it, then do that! It doesn't matter how 'valuable' that subject might seem, if you're bored by it, it's going to be a pain in your butt for the entire time to you do it and you're going to want to procrastinate about it.

If it's too late to change, then decide to do everything and anything you can to get interested in this subject. You only get every minute of your life once and it's more fun to spend them at least attempting to be interested than being switched off and bored.

If revision bores you to tears, then CHANGE the way you revise! (See the separate article on Revision.) Reading and making notes might suit some people but I've yet to meet someone who loves it to bits. Also, we all have different ways that we learn and so it's important to work out what's best for you and then adapt how you do your revision to make it a good fit. Basically, if you're using a method that bores the pants off you, you're not going to learn anything much and you're much more likely to procrastinate. So be creative – find a method that makes learning interesting! And if you don't actually like academic learning, then make plans to leave this school as soon as you can and find another way to get qualifications!!! It's not impossible!

Sometimes we're just bored with this phase of our lives – we've lost the plot. Why are we doing this anyway? Try sitting down and reminding yourself of your aims and goals. Persuade yourself to manage or tolerate the boredom, in order to achieve your goal.

Fear of failure

Have you noticed that you put off big tasks by doing little tasks? It's easy to get on with and feel busy with the day to day stuff. After all, it has to be done, doesn't it? But the stuff that really counts and might really make a difference to our lives – that's the stuff we put off because, weirdly, we're so scared of failing, it feels better not to even start! That way we can't ever look incompetent or incapable.

Constantly reminding ourselves of how very important this task is, is therefore unlikely to work. That will just add to the fear.

Instead, try talking to yourself about how relatively UNIMPORTANT it is. So what if you fail you're A-levels? You won't die. Life will go on. Something will turn up. So what if you don't get all A*s? A few

years ago, there were no A*s anyway. So what if you don't go to your first choice of uni – there are other unis, and other great courses and other great people to meet. And so on.

The idea is to turn the task from something too scary to start and risk failure, into an everyday thing that you do as a normal part of life – because, at the end of the day, that is what it actually is! Millions of people are doing challenging things all over the world every hour of every day.

Fear of Unpleasantness

We've all been there – we're putting something off because we just don't like it!

There's a famous book on low motivation and procrastination called 'Eat the Frog!' Essentially, the point is in the title. Ask yourself, if you had to eat a live frog every day, what would be the best strategy to deal with it? Most people will say that it's best to eat it first thing in the morning and get it over with, otherwise just thinking about it will wreck the rest of your day.

The principle is true for most things that we don't want to do which are unpleasant. Just get them done! Then we are free to enjoy the things that we do like. It can be such a relief to get something out of the way that has been niggling at us or that we've been dreading. If we don't, the dread will sit in our minds like a Dementor, sucking all the pleasure out of our lives.

An overriding need for leisure/pleasure

It's all about balance. Only you can work out whether you are putting off work because you are over-working and desperately need some down time or whether you just prefer having fun to work. (In the latter case, I'm afraid a boot up your own butt is what is required – sometimes you just have to take charge of yourself because no one else is going to do it for you!)

Bear in mind that EVERYONE procrastinates to some extent. You are not alone. Even the most successful and apparently permanently on-task superstar footles or fuffs about to some extent! J.M.W Turner, the famous artist, who produced phenomenal paintings and loads of them, spent a lot of time doing pornographic doodles! Remember that we only see other people's output – not the hidden hours Googling cool haircuts or watching cat videos!

But still create a balance!

The **Pomodoro Method** is a good way to start. This way, you break the task into small units with breaks for leisure/pleasure to reward yourself. (It got its name from the tomato (Pomodoro) shaped timer that the inventor, Francesco Cirilla, used to time himself!)



Get started with **THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE**

- 1** Identify your tasks for the day
 - 2** Set a timer for 25 minutes
 - 3** Work for the duration of the timer
 - 4** Take a five minute break
- ★ After every fourth break, take a longer break of 15-30 minutes

Tiredness

If you are tired, EVERYTHING is more difficult. You will be more prone to low moods, physical tasks will feel harder, you won't be able to concentrate so well – and your motivation and self-control will be shot to bits.

Tiredness can trap you in a really toxic procrastinating loop.

You feel too tired to do the task – so you do something else and put it off. By the time you tackle it, you are more tired than ever so you do it poorly – or feel that you're doing it poorly but you are too tired to make sensible judgements, so you battle on, doing it inefficiently and badly. You then go to bed much later than you intended, feeling low and dissatisfied. You get up the next day feeling tired, ready for another day of inefficient work, low motivation, bad feelings about your abilities and therefore more procrastination!

Answer: above all, get enough sleep. It is your number 1 priority. If you are procrastinating about going to bed, because of the voices telling you that you HAVE to finish your work or you MUST have some leisure before turning in, SILENCE them. They are your enemies. If you sleep enough, you will work more efficiently and have more time for leisure. That will feel a lot better than being like a zombie all the time because you are endlessly procrastinating about work or sleep.

Here's a great little video to encourage you: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Roh7D027spA>

Poor risk management/assessment

The first thing to do is to accept that, as a teenager, you are more at risk of poor risk management. You may feel like you can conquer the world at times but that is part of what makes you bad a risk management! Therefore, if you are a procrastinator, do not believe the little voice that tells you that you can 'get away with it this once' or that 'it'll be all right on the night' or that 'you can catch up later'. These voices have their time and place but this isn't it!

Instead, try an audit of your life. A useful method is **Stephen Covey's Urgent/Important matrix**.

1.Urgent and Important	2.Urgent but Not Important
3.Not Urgent but Important	4.Not Urgent and Not Important

List all the activities in your life, putting them into the relevant boxes. Stephen Covey argues that most of us could do with spending more time in the Not Urgent but Important box because we are so often driven by urgency that what is important to us is pushed out. But if you are a procrastinator, you need to spend most of your time with the Urgent and Important box, to get the essential stuff done! Balance is crucial so of course it's important to do some fun stuff which may be neither urgent nor important – but if you are aiming to avoid procrastination, you do need to stay focused on box 1 until the most urgent stuff is done!

'Spoilt Child Syndrome'

OK, so you can carry on being 'spoilt' for the rest of your life or you can bite the bullet and start training yourself to accept that life isn't all cookies and candyfloss! Sometimes difficult stuff just has to be done and there is no apparent reward. Hopefully, there might be – you might get some great grades in the long run, but there is no pay off right now, apart from the satisfaction of having started the job!

You're going to have to train up your mental muscles so start small. If you have an essay to write, break it up into a hundred units. If you've been asked for 1500 words, every sentence will be about 1%. Decided what percentage you can brace yourself to do and do it. Do not stop till it is done. Repeat the process. Gradually, you will get better at this game and you'll be able to face bigger percentages.

Also, if you're in the habit of being a teenage slob at home, start shaping up by making your bed every day. This is army training for you. It's about detail and being consistent and taking responsibility for your own stuff. You'll also feel much better if you return to a made bed every day and therefore less likely to drop into instant slob mode. It's one small way in which you can start teaching your brain to be responsible and adult. You may be surprised by the knock on effect.

Perfectionism

The key to defeating perfectionism (and it DOES need defeating as it is such a cruel tyrant) is to accept that nothing in life is perfect and nothing is certain! It doesn't matter how hard you work or how much revision you do, you cannot guarantee your results. You cannot be in control of your life. You can make efforts to take control and that is sensible, but life is unpredictable. The more we can get used to that idea, the less likely we are to be fazed if something unexpected happens and the less likely we are to be immobilized by our fear that what we do will not be perfect. So try this:

Entertain yourself by giving less than perfect titles to your tasks eg:

1. First probably rubbish version.

2. Second marginally less rubbish version.
3. Final could undoubtedly be better version.

Or

1. Initial pathetic sketch.
2. Slightly better attempt.
3. Final piece which some people will probably hate.

Or

1. OMG, I really don't get this!
2. The fog is beginning to clear!
3. I might actually have understood this stuff.

In counselling, we often talk about 'positive self-talk'. This is where you give yourself a good mental talking to, in a clear and rational way. It's NOT beating yourself up about your imperfections!

Some good 'positive self-talk' to defeat Perfectionism could go like this:

'Nothing in life is perfect – get over it!'

'Failure is a great teacher – if I don't get this right, it'll be a great way to find out what I still need to learn.'

'Feel the fear and do it anyway'.

'The person who never makes a mistake, never makes anything.'

'Nothing is all bad or all good – there is always a range.'

'I wouldn't expect anyone else to be perfect, why am I expecting it of myself?'

Learning to deal with procrastination and low motivation isn't easy but it's really worth it in the long run. I hope this article has given you a better understanding of what's going on for you and how to tackle it.

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