Get Started

Learn how to beat the annoying habit of procrastinating and just get started

Module 2

Protection level: 5000

CEDARS – Counselling and Person Enrichment Section (CoPE)

Contents

How to Use this Workbook

This workbook is part of a self-help program which intends to help you overcome procrastination. The program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading and multimedia materials, reflective exercises and practices. It covers topics such as psychology of procrastination, ways to analyse your own procrastination and beat it, and practical tips to motivate yourself and make your tasks more manageable.

The program is a series of 5 learning modules, each takes you roughly 30 minutes to go through. We recommend completing each module in one sitting and doing 1 module weekly for 5 consecutive weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community here when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

Enquiries and Feedback

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Introduction

Good to see you again!

In this module, we're going to explore what procrastination is and understand why people do it. Ready to do some digging?

▶ This module will take around 30 minutes

▶ We recommend a quiet, relaxing place

▶ Have these things at hand:

    - Your calendar

    - A notepad or notes app on your phone
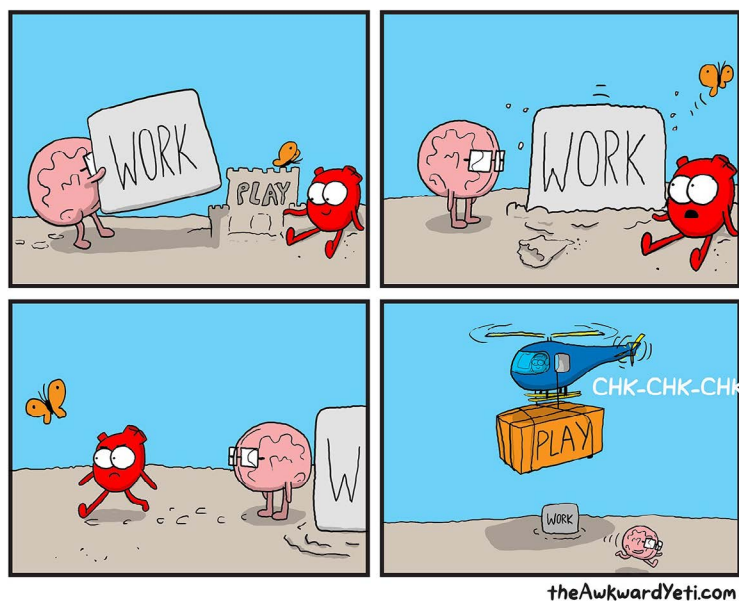
Comic from The Awkward Yeti, but don't click this link to procrastinate on doing this module ;)

POP-quiz!

Before we get into it, think about this question for a minute:

What do you think about yourself when you procrastinate? For example: do you get annoyed at yourself, or call yourself names?

Take a moment to write down the thoughts you have about yourself when you procrastinate:

Now it's time for a quiz: are these statements TRUE or FALSE?

People who procrastinate are lazy.

This is FALSE!

Laziness is defined as not wanting to put energy into something. Procrastinators truly do want to complete their tasks because they know it's important, but they feel blocked somehow. Hopefully this module will demonstrate that and you won't believe procrastination is being lazy anymore.

EVERYONE procrastinates.

This is TRUE!

You, me, Elon Musk and Beyonce; we all procrastinate. But not everybody procrastinates on the same thing and some people just have more tools at hand to combat this annoying habit.

Procrastination is always about avoiding negative emotions.

This is TRUE!

Procrastination is actually a defense mechanism to protect you from negative emotions. We don't enjoy for example feeling bored, spending a lot of energy on difficult things, risk failing or feeling overwhelmed. So when we're faced with a task that might cause these feelings, procrastination comes and 'protects' us from them.

Defining procrastination

There are a lot of (mis)conceptions about procrastination, some of which we'll be looking at today. But first things first:

How do you define procrastination?
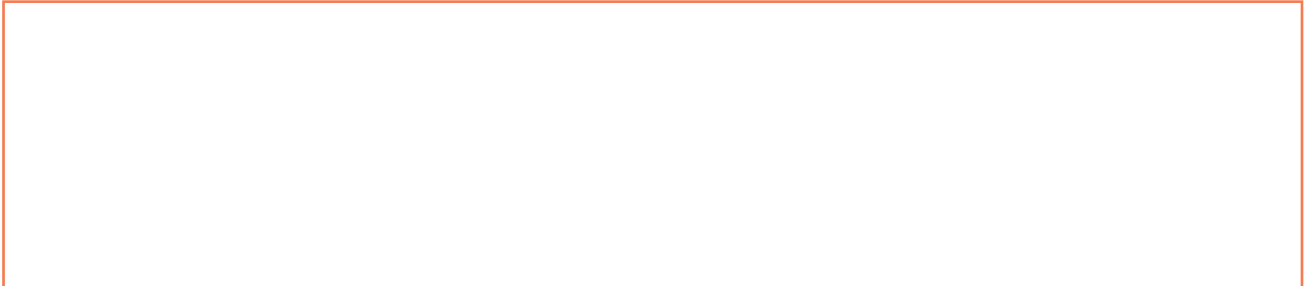
There's no right or wrong answer. For comparison, check out the official definition and the mechanics of procrastination in this <u>video</u> (The video transcript is available on <u>p.12</u>):

A little experiment

Let's take a closer look at how procrastination works in the following experiment.

Rate yourself from 1 to 10 in different situations.

On a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means you feel like this: And 10 means you feel like this:

Imagine you had a test last week and the results just came in.

Situation 1

Imagine you failed, BUT: you had been so busy with other things that you actually didn't have much time to study. The bad grade was somewhat expected, so when your classmate asks about your grade you say something like: "I failed, but I only studied for like two days so I kind of saw it coming."

How would you feel about yourself in this situation? (1 = terrible, 10 = amazing)

○ 1   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○ 10

Situation 2

Now imagine everything was the same as the last situation (you were busy and didn't study), BUT you actually got a good grade. Surprise! You tell your classmate, and they say "Wow, I wish I didn't have to study and still get such good grades!"

How would you feel about yourself in this situation? (1 = terrible, 10 = amazing)

○ 1   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○ 10

Situation 3

In an alternate universe, you did not procrastinate at all but studied diligently for several weeks. The test results come in and... You got a great grade! It feels good (if expected), given all the time you put in. You might think something like: "I'm glad I got a good grade after spending all that time!"

How would you feel about yourself in this situation? (1 = terrible, 10 = amazing)

○ 1   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○ 10

Situation 4

Last scenario: you studied really hard for weeks but still failed the test... You might think to yourself: "I worked so hard and still failed, I must be really dumb."

How would you feel about yourself in this situation? (1 = terrible, 10 = amazing)

○ 1   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○ 10

Now compare the way you feel about all the situations. What do you notice?

You procrastinated and failed: <u>Refer to the scale you entered for Situation 1</u>

You studied hard and failed: <u>Refer to the scale you entered for Situation 4</u>

You procrastinated and got a great grade: <u>Refer to the scale you entered for Situation 2</u>

You studied hard and got a great grade: <u>Refer to the scale you entered for Situation 3</u>

Most people feel less bad about themselves if they failed while procrastinating. And they feel better if they got a good grade while procrastinating. And that's how procrastination is protection against (the risk of) losing face, lowered self-esteem and general unhappiness.

What did you notice about yourself when comparing the situations? How does procrastination impact how you feel about a result?

The annoying thing about our brains is that we subconsciously live through all of these scenarios way before they actually happen.

When it's time to start studying, we might picture failing the test. We might imagine feeling dumb or getting judged. The more negative things we think about ourselves, the worse we feel. And right at that moment, when we're most vulnerable, procrastination swoops in. It distracts us from these negative thoughts and feelings and helps us feel better by suggesting we Netflix, or go on Insta, or get some food, or ..., or...

And that's how procrastination 'protects' us from negative emotions.

Pros & cons

The conclusion is that procrastinating actually makes you feel good (in the short run). So why shouldn't we all procrastinate all the time and be happy? But you know very well there are some serious downsides to procrastinating.

Grab your list of procrastination moments if you did the assignment from the previous module, or think back to the past few weeks and choose a procrastination instance you clearly remember.

What was the task?

What was the monkey action?

First let's look at the downsides of procrastinating

Most procrastinators are pretty well aware of all the downsides of procrastinating. Other than not getting things done, it often also negatively impacts mood and self-esteem, and might cause stress and worry.

Think about it for a minute and write down the downsides of procrastinating on the task you wrote above. List as many cons as you can.

Need a hint?

Example task: Netflixing instead of writing paper

Downsides:

- I get stressed in the evening

- I can't enjoy Netflix guilt-free

- Risk writing a bad paper

- Risk getting a low grade on the paper

- I get mad at myself for being lazy / irresponsible

- I dislike myself a little

On the flipside: what are the benefits of procrastinating?

As you saw earlier in this module, procrastination is actually a protection strategy. It temporarily shields you from all sorts of bad feelings as well as offer some entertainment value and feel-good emotions. Most people blame themselves for procrastinating because they're not aware of these 'psychological benefits'.

What were the benefits of procrastinating on the task you wrote above? What feelings do you get to avoid, and which feelings do you get instead? Take your time to think about it and list as many as you can (e.g. less stressed, temporarily forget about the unhappiness brought by the assignment or having an excuse for the bad grade).

Need a hint?

Example task: Netflixing instead of writing paper

Benefits

- I don't write a bad paper

- I don't start worrying about doing a bad job or failing

- Temporarily relieve my stress

- I don't have to worry about how to get started

- I don't have to work hard and spend energy

- Netflix is more fun

Looking at the official definition of procrastination again...

It probably makes a lot more sense now:

"Procrastination is to voluntarily delay an intended action despite expecting to be worse-off for the delay. It's a mechanism for coping with the negative emotions associated with starting or finishing a task."

Wrap-up

Hopefully you now have a better understanding of the nature of procrastination

We tend to beat ourselves up about procrastinating, and you were probably already aware of some of the downsides. But what most people don't realise is there are a lot of benefits to procrastinating too.

Please refer back to p.3 to recap what you thought about yourself when you procrastinate at the beginning of the module.

Do you look at it differently now that you've done this module? If so: how have your thoughts changed?

Understanding a habit is a crucial first step to changing it, and after this module you are well on your way of cracking this nut.

The facts in a row

- Procrastinating is not the same as being lazy

- Everyone procrastinates at some things

- Procrastination is a choice, which we make because it 'protects' us from negative emotions associated with starting or finishing a task

- So procrastination is actually a very effective coping mechanism in the short term.

- In the long term however, the downsides usually outweigh the benefits.

Wrap-up

You've completed the second module- good job!

We recommend waiting a week or so before doing the next module and doing this assignment in the meantime:

Assignment

For the coming week, continue keeping track of your tasks and monkey actions, but now add the pros and cons of procrastinating as well. Here's an example:

Task	Monkey action
Writing paper	Netflixing
Downsides of procrastinating	Benefits of procrastinating
- I get stressed in the evening - I can't enjoy Netflix guilt-free - Risk writing a bad paper - Risk getting a low grade on the paper - I get mad at myself for being lazy / irresponsible - I dislike myself	- I don't write a bad paper - I don't start worrying about doing a bad job or failing - Temporarily relieve my stress - I don't have to worry about how to get started - I don't have to work hard and spend energy - Netflix is more fun

You can keep track however you want: on a notepad, in your phone…And you don't need to analyse or change anything, simply observe yourself and write it down.

Last thing: decide when you would like to do the next module and put it in your calendar now.

What did you think of this module? Please click here to let us know your views.
You are highly encouraged to complete the next module.

Good luck and until next time!

Supplementary information

Officially, the definition of procrastination is as follows:

Procrastination is to voluntarily delay an intended action despite expecting to be worse-off for the delay.

Notice the word 'voluntarily'? As in: people choose to procrastinate. This is counter-intuitive and might not feel true, because sometimes this choice is so automatic or habitual that we feel powerless to change it. But actually, it's very logical, because here is the second part of the official definition:

It's a mechanism for coping with the negative emotions associated with starting or finishing a task.

Let's look a bit closer at this mechanism which causes people to voluntarily procrastinate over and over (and over) - even though they know it's bad for them.

At the core of this procrastination mechanism is a formula most people think is true:

Our ability and performance   =   our worth and self-esteem

In other words and simplified a little: how well we do determines how good we feel about ourselves. Not to say that's how it should be - quite the opposite, everyone deserves to feel as if they're unconditionally worthy - but unfortunately it is how most people operate. Oftentimes, our performance is what other people judge us on and what we judge ourselves on.

Good performance means you feel good about yourself. Bad performance means you feel bad about yourself. And that's directly linked to procrastination. Because the easiest way to make sure you DON'T do badly is to not do it at all!