Get Started

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

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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Module 4

I've got to break free

Introduction

How did it go with keeping track of your procrastination cycles?

Hopefully you didn't procrastinate on it, because today you're going to work with something on your list and break free of the cycle in 5 easy steps.

▶ This module will take around 30 minutes + make sure you have at least 15 minutes afterwards

▶ We recommend a quiet, relaxing place

▶ Have these things at hand:

   - Your calendar

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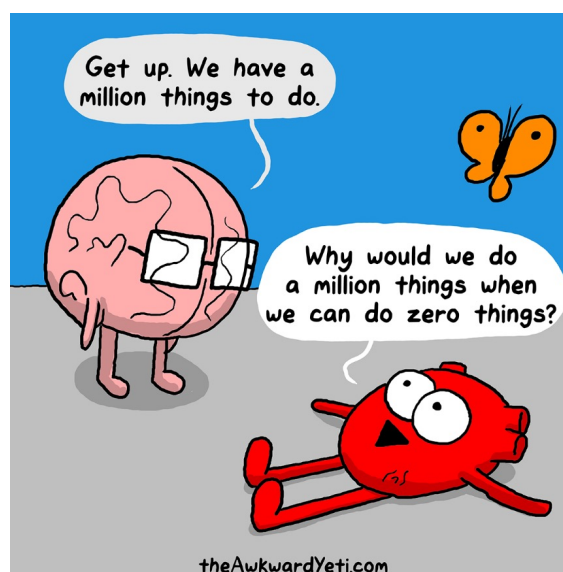
Comic by The Awkward Yeti, but don't click this link to procrastinate on doing this module ;)

I solemnly swear...

Let's get started!

Grab your procrastination list from the last few weeks, look it over, and choose one important task you could start working on today.

What's the one task you want to work on? (Answer A)

As you probably know it's easy to intend to do something. Yet when push comes to shove, we often still procrastinate. So before we continue, you need to commit to change.

Write a promise to Future You about how you WILL start on this one thing today:

I solemnly swear that (Answer B)

Are you going to stick to your promise? Pinky-swear?

○ Yes

Awesome, let's get cracking then!

Fill out the complete Procrastination Cycle for the one thing you want to work on today:

I needed to… (refer to answer A on p.3)

My automatic negative thought was… (Answer C)

This thought made me feel… (Answer D)

I avoided doing it by… (Answer E)

Procrastination Brain condoned this by thinking… (Answer F)

The better you get at recognising your negative thoughts and feelings, the easier it will be to turn them around. So today we're going to work on doing just that: replacing these negative thoughts and feelings with more helpful ones.

There are 5 steps to this process.

① Recognising thinking errors

Firstly, you need to be on the lookout for the errors in your automatic thoughts.

Because often, our automatic thoughts are biased and inaccurate. And they also tend to create negative emotions.

She doesn't want to be friends anymore :(
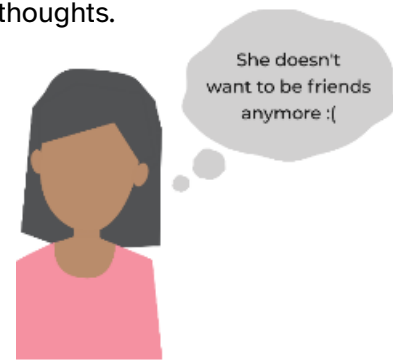
Here's a personal example:

I was trying to make plans with a friend and she was ignoring me for over a month. My **automatic thought** was: *"She doesn't want to be friends anymore."* This made me sad and caused me to doubt myself.

After several weeks, I asked her: Do you not want to hang out anymore? Turns out she had been going through a really rough time and was starting therapy. It had nothing to do with me and she really valued our friendship. As soon as I realised this, my sadness disappeared.
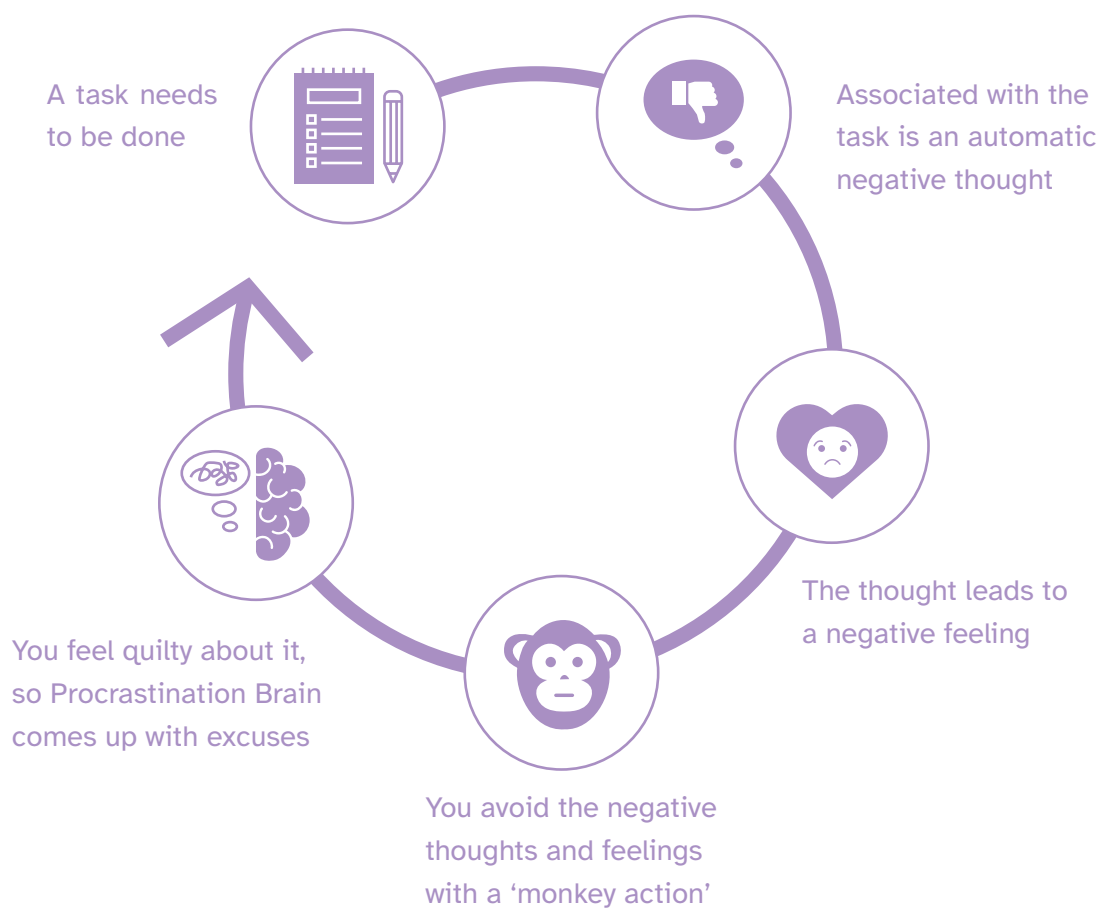
Read more examples of how thoughts can create emotions:

Scenario	Thoughts
You're at a party and get introduced to Jake. As you are talking, you notice he's constantly looking away.	• You could think: "This guy is a bit rude, he's not even listening to me." This would probably make you feel a bit annoyed. • You could think: "He's so bored by what I'm telling him…" This might make you feel a little insecure. • You could think: "Maybe he's actively thinking about what I'm saying." and feel motivated to continue the conversation.
You were supposed to meet friends, but they're late.	• You could think: "They're late, AGAIN. When will they stop wasting my time!" and feel a little angry. • You could think: "I hope nothing bad happened to them…" and feel worried. • You could think: "There were really bad traffic jams, they're probably stuck there" and feel a little sympathetic.

As you can see, the situation is always the same. It's purely your thoughts about the situation that determine how you feel.

As you saw in the previous modules, the Procrastination Cycle occurs when there are negative feelings associated with a task. But as you saw, these **negative feelings** are often caused by **automatic thoughts**. And those thoughts tend to be quite inaccurate.

So in order to break the cycle of procrastination, you need to recognise mistakes in your automatic thoughts. We call these mistakes '**thinking errors**'.

A task needs to be done

Associated with the task is an automatic negative thought

The thought leads to a negative feeling

You avoid the negative thoughts and feelings with a 'monkey action'

You feel quilty about it, so Procrastination Brain comes up with excuses

Here are some very common types of thinking errors:

Recognising thinking errors

6 common thinking errors

All-or-nothing

Thinking in absolutes, without any nuance. You can recognise this thinking error by words such as always, all, completely, never, everything, nothing, and ever.

One-eye

Only seeing what went wrong, and being blind to everything that went right. If you find yourself paying way too much attention to the negative, that might be a sign of this thinking error.

Dictator

Trying to force yourself to do something by applying negative, external pressure. With this thinking error you don't choose or want to, but you 'have to', 'should', 'need to', and 'must'.

Fortune teller

Assuming you know what's going to happen in the future. This thinking error pops up when your thoughts include predictions like "I'm going to fail this test anyway" or "I'll feel more like studying tomorrow".

Labelmaker

Labeling yourself based on your shortcomings, instead of separating the situation from your identity. An example of this thinking error is going "I'm such an idiot!" instead of "I made a mistake".
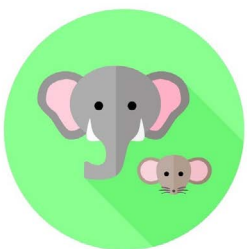
Mouse-Elephant

Blowing things up out of proportion, sometimes even catastrophizing. An example of this thinking error is getting one bad grade and then thinking "I'm not going to pass this year!".

POP-quiz!

Which thinking errors do these thoughts contain?

Thought	Thinking Errors
I don't understand this, I'm just not smart enough	**The labelmaker** Just because something is difficult or complex, that doesn't say anything about you as a person such as that you're smart or dumb.
This task is so boring and annoying	**The one-eye** This thought focuses only on the negative when there are usually also benefits to do any task.
I'm totally lost and have no idea where to start	**The all-or-nothing** It's very hard to have NO IDEA about something, usually there's always one small step you can take.
I should really get started. I simply have to suck it up and do it	**The dictator** This thought is trying to make you take action with brute force by using 'should' and 'have to'.

Now let's take a look at your automatic thought from before.

As you now know, automatic thoughts often contain **thinking errors**, making them biased, inaccurate and unhelpful. Once you spot a thinking error, that means your brain is tricking you into feeling bad!

This was the task you wanted to work on today: (refer to answer A on p.3)

And this was the automatic negative thought associated with the task: (refer to answer C on p.4)

Which thinking error(s) does this thought contain? You can select several, as they can overlap.

☐ The all-or-nothing

☐ The one-eye

☐ The labelmaker

☐ The fortune-teller

☐ The dictator

☐ The mouse-elephant

Reminder: what do the thinking errors entail?

All-or-nothing	Thinking in absolutes, without any nuance. You can recognise this thinking error by words such as always, all, completely, never, everything, nothing, and ever.
One-eye	Only seeing what went wrong, and being blind to everything that went right. If you find yourself paying way too much attention to the negative, that might be a sign of this thinking error.
Dictator	Trying to force yourself to do something by applying negative, external pressure. With this thinking error you don't choose or want to, but you 'have to', 'should', 'need to', and 'must'.
Fortune teller	Assuming you know what's going to happen in the future. This thinking error pops up when your thoughts include predictions like "I'm going to fail this test anyway" or "I'll feel more like studying tomorrow".
Labelmaker	Labeling yourself based on your shortcomings, instead of separating the situation from your identity. An example of this thinking error is "I'm such an idiot!" instead of "I made a mistake".
Mouse-Elephant	Blowing things up out of proportion, sometimes even catastrophizing. An example of this thinking error is getting one bad grade and then thinking "I'm not going to pass this year!".

Thinking errors are unhelpful and biased and they often lead to negative emotions.

Luckily, it's pretty easy to deal with a thinking error. All you have to do is to challenge the thought on how true it actually is because these errors tend to buckle very quickly under interrogation. This brings us to step 2…

② Question the thought

Remember the example from earlier about getting ignored by a friend? The automatic thought 'She doesn't want to be friends anymore' turned out to be totally false. Rather than sitting around and feeling insecure, the better approach was to try and get to the truth.

And that's the next step when you spot a thinking error: **to question this thought**.

As a reminder, the one thing you were going to work on today was: (refer to answer A on p.3)

Your automatic negative thought was: (refer to answer C on p.4)

This thought contained these thinking error(s): (refer to p.9 for the thinking errors checked)

Now question the thought: formulate 3 arguments why it might not be (totally) true.

Ask yourself questions like:

- Is there another side to the story?

- Is the thought exaggerated?

- Are there facts supporting the thought, or is it based on assumptions?

- Does it include predictions about the future?

- Does the thought draw premature conclusions?

Write your 3 (or more) arguments against your automatic thought: (Answer G)

③ Replace the thought

Now that you have a more realistic view on the situation, we can move on to step 3: replacing the biased thought with a more accurate and helpful thought.

To get the inspiration going, here are the thinking errors from the pop quiz and their replacing thoughts:

Biased thought	Replacement thought
There's no way I can do this, I'm just not smart enough.	I've had similar thoughts before, but the fact that I'm still here is proof that I'm smart enough. I just need to take it one step at a time.
This task is so boring and annoying.	I might not enjoy this task, but there are real benefits to doing it, such as … and …
I'm totally lost and don't know where to start.	Though I can't oversee the whole project right now, I can always think of at least one first step, such as re-reading the assignment, or asking a classmate for help.
I should really get started. I simply have to suck it up and do it.	I can choose to start because I know there are benefits, or choose to delay and accept the consequences. But either way, it's a choice I make.

Now use the arguments from the interrogation to replace your automatic thought.

The automatic thought: (refer to answer C on p.4)

The thinking error(s): (refer to p.9 for the thinking errors checked)

The arguments against it: (refer to answer G on p.10)

Come up with a new, more helpful thought to replace the old thought: (Answer H)

4 **Repeat, repeat, repeat**

And just like that you're becoming a master of your own mind!

Old thought: (refer to answer C on p.4)

New thought: (refer to answer H on p.11)

Sometimes the new thought instantly replaces the old one. But most of the time, it takes a bit more practice as the old thought keeps popping back up now and then. If this happens: don't get discouraged! It's completely normal.

Repetition is key

Remind yourself of your new thought and repeat it to yourself as often as you need to in order to replace the old thought.

How will you remind yourself of the new thought?

☐ I will write it on a piece of paper and keep it in my bag / wallet / journal

☐ I will set it as the lock-screen on my phone

☐ I will hang reminder notes around the house / my room

☐ Otherwise, namely _____

Recognising thinking errors and turning them into more accurate, helpful thoughts is a core part to beating procrastination. Keep at it, because these new thoughts are a bridge towards the final step, which is...
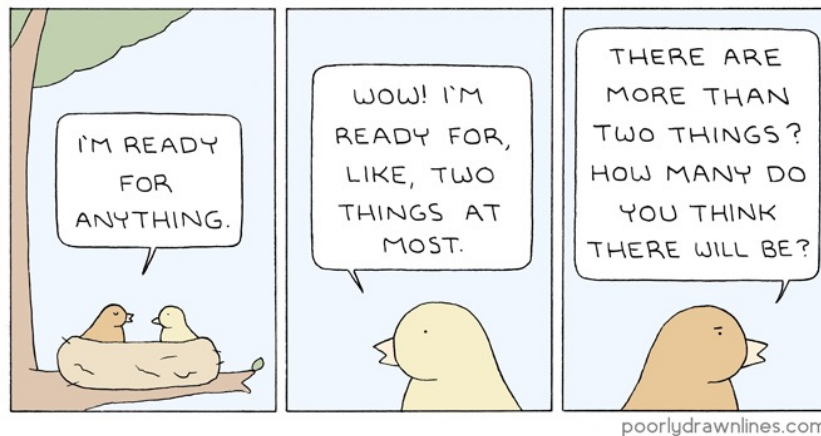
Drumroll please...

⑤ Just get started!

It sounds counter-intuitive, right? Your exact problem as a procrastinator is not being able to get started.

False. Your exact problem as a procrastinator WAS not being able to get started. The negative thoughts and feelings were blocking you, but now you know how to recognise and challenge them.

That means you are ready.

Comic by Poorly Drawn Lines

But before you go, we want to stress the importance of one more thing.

In the beginning of the module, you chose one important thing you could start working on today. The emphasis here is on START. A classic procrastinator's mistake is to focus on FINISHING a task.

Research has shown over and over that just starting, even if it's only for a few minutes, creates positive momentum. It's just like cycling: maintaining speed is much easier than accelerating from a standstill.

And on top of that: usually once someone starts on the task they'd been putting off for so long, they actually find it's not nearly as bad as they'd imagined. And this creates extra motivation to keep going.

Starting something breaks you free from the paralysis of fear and worry, whereas thinking about **finishing** it only causes more.

So let's start starting, and finish finishing!

And here are all the steps to beating procrastination one more time (The video transcript is available on p.17):

Wrap-up

Today you learned how to break free of the Procrastination Cycle!

How did it go? How was it to analyze your thoughts and replace them?

The facts in a row

- The first step is to analyze the automatic thoughts: are they realistic and nuanced, or do they contain thinking errors (making them biased and unhelpful)?

- Once you spot a thinking error, you can question that thought. Come up with arguments why it might not be totally true.

- Then you can formulate a new, more helpful thought to replace the old thought.

- Practice makes perfect, as they say. Every time the old thought pops up, remind yourself of the new thought you formulated.

- Once you've replaced the thought, you can overcome procrastination and start! Do not focus on finishing a task, this only makes it harder. Instead, aim at starting - even if it's just a couple of minutes.

And speaking of starting on a task...

We've come to the end of the module! As a reminder...

The one thing you were going to start on today was: (refer to answer A on p.3)
_____

And you pink-promised you were fully committed: I solemnly swear that... (refer to answer B on p.3)
_____

So now is the time to just get started on this task. Roll up those sleeves and get cracking on the assignment below!

Assignment

Your assignment for TODAY is to get started on the one task you committed to in this module. The goal is to work on it for 15 uninterrupted minutes (not shorter, but longer is allowed).

A secondary assignment is to practice breaking the Procrastination Cycle by following the steps from this module:

1 **Recognise thinking errors in your automatic thought**

2 **Question the automatic thought and come up with counter-arguments**

3 **Replace the old thought with a more helpful, new thought**

4 **Repeat the new thought every time the old thought pops back up**

5 **Just get started for 15 uninterrupted minutes**

Try writing the steps down in your phone or notebook so you remember them. Or simply keep track in the 'Tools' section on this platform.

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

There are 5 steps to breaking the procrastination cycle and getting started on a task!

The first step is to uncover and analyze the automatic thoughts that cause you to procrastinate. Ask yourself: are my thoughts realistic and nuanced, or do they contain thinking errors (making them biased and unhelpful)?

Once you spot a thinking error, such as the all-or-nothing or one-eye, you can question that thought. So the second step is to come up with arguments why the thought might not be (totally) true.

Step 3 is formulating a new, more realistic, and helpful thought to replace the old thought. You can use the arguments from the previous step to help you come up with a more realistic thought.

The next step is to remind yourself of the new thought you formulated every time the old thought pops up. Practice makes perfect, as they say, so keep replacing the negative thought as often as you need to.

Last step! Once you've replaced the thought, you can overcome procrastination and start! Don't focus on finishing a task, this only makes it harder. Instead, aim at starting - even if it's just for a couple of minutes.