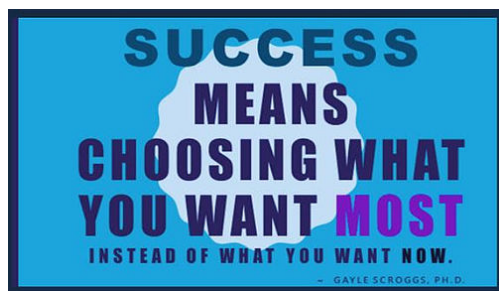


What Really Makes You Procrastinate--And Proven Ways to Get Back on Track | Issue 209



Editor's Note: Would You Rather Feel Good or Finish?

What are your favorite ways of procrastinating instead of dissertating? TV? Facebook? De-cluttering? Or an ABD perennial favorite, reading another research article? What else?

Take a moment to think back the last time you decided to put your dissertation on the back burner. Chances are that you were beset by anxiety or feeling stuck. And you decided to go for feeling good instead of doing well.

You are not alone if you choose delaying tactics in order to avoid feeling frustrated or fuzzy. But choosing a short-term positive mood gain over the long-term benefit ultimately backfires, as the data on failure to complete doctorates reflects. If you want to go from putting things off to getting things done, keep reading. Dr. Karen Forbes, an esteemed therapist and coach, will share evidence-based strategies that promote sustainable progress and goal attainment.

Wishing you success and well-being,

Gayle

Gayle Scroggs, Ph.D., P.C.C.
Editor

Words from the Wise

"Procrastination is the thief of time, collar him." ~ Charles Dickens

"Procrastination is opportunity's natural assassin." ~ Victor Kiam

"Someday is not a day of the week." ~ Janet Dailey

"Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone." ~ Pablo Picasso

"You may delay, but time will not." ~ Benjamin Franklin

"Procrastination is the biggest problem in academia." ~ Timothy Pychyl, Ph.D.

The Secret to Conquering Procrastination: Master Your ETA

By Karen Forbes, Ph.D.

How guilty are you when it comes to putting off your dissertation work? Don't despair. You can learn how to quickly identify and then navigate the three major roadblocks that are keeping you from reaching your destination. Master these strategies and you'll soon be getting that hood and velvet stripes.

Delaying a task makes sense when you have more pressing needs. But when putting things off has long-term negative consequences, it crosses the line into procrastination. That's dangerous.

Success requires developing effective strategies to conquer the natural human tendency to procrastinate. The fastest way to do that is to check in on your emotions, thoughts and attitudes—your personal "ETA profile"—when you are tempted to wander off track.

Why do we put off something when we know it's likely to make our life worse?

We procrastinate because we want to feel better.

Procrastination often involves an aversive emotional state that we are driven to reduce or eliminate. This tendency to focus on fixing our bad mood instead of on accomplishing our tasks is "giving in to feel good," explains Timothy Pychyl, Ph.D., in [Solving the Procrastination Puzzle](#).

Unfortunately, using procrastination to avoid a bad mood only reinforces the connection between avoidance and feeling better. That's about as helpful as repeatedly allowing a kid to raid the cookie jar instead of eating a healthy lunch.

Every time you put things off you are strengthening a bad habit that then becomes very hard to break.

Furthermore, procrastination robs you of the opportunity the relief and pleasure derived from accomplishing an important yet dreaded task—the very experiences that would build an achievement habit.

How many times have you noticed that performing many such tasks, e.g., writing the results section or tracking down an article, turn out to be much less painful than expected? Wouldn't you rather trade feeling guilty for a sense of accomplishment?

The ability to regulate emotions and resist temptation varies from person to person. Someone who tends toward impulsivity and low levels of deliberation may be more susceptible to procrastination's sly tug.

[Author's Note: Curious about your personal susceptibility to strong negative emotions? Take a version of the Five Factor Personality Inventory here: <http://personal.psu.edu/~j5j/IPIP/>. But don't use it to procrastinate!]

MANAGING YOUR DISTRACTIONS AND NEGATIVE MOODS

If you struggle with distractions, remove temptations from your work site. Do you need to leave your phone or iPad in the kitchen? Many dissertators rely on internet blocking apps such as [RescueTime](#) to thwart detours to favorite websites.

Getting familiar with your negative emotions will also enable you to respond more effectively. Try any of these four strategies to manage them better:

1. Next time you hear yourself saying "I'll do this later" or "One episode of Netflix will help me get in the mood to work," pause. Acknowledge that there is likely to be an emotional state you are trying to avoid. Ask yourself, "What's really making me feel this way right now? What am I trying to run away from?"
2. Sit with the emotion for a certain period of time. Use the countdown clock on your phone or an old fashioned timer to make sure you let yourself experience working on your dissertation at the same time you are feeling the negative emotion. Your mood does not have to interfere with doing the task.
3. Remember that you feel many emotions simultaneously. Part of you might be feeling anxious or bored, but you might also be feeling proud, curious, or interested. Imagine your concentration is a compass needle and you are exerting a magnetic force to pull it away from the aversive emotion and toward to more positive or neutral one.
4. Take a moment to recall a time in your life when you felt awe or wonder. These emotions are strongly associated with well-being and can lift your mood enough to help you get started.

"I'M WAITING UNTIL I FEEL LIKE WRITING"

How often have you thought that you have to feel like working on your dissertation in order to be productive?

Research on procrastination refutes this belief. You are better off not waiting for your muse to appear.

Do you cite fatigue and lack of concentration to justify putting things off until you "feel like it" at times? Perhaps your long day of teaching, researching, and caring for others has convinced you that you have exhausted the inner resources needed to dissertate.

Indeed, that "ego depletion" view is corroborated by willpower research led by [Roy Baumeister, Ph.D.](#) Various studies showed that after expending considerable energy on one task, subjects tended to perform more poorly on subsequent tasks unless given a boost or a rest, leading to the metaphor of "willpower as a muscle."

However, your belief in the limits of willpower energy just might be more important than the actual energy you've spent.

Investigators at Stanford and Zurich have recently found that individuals who reject the belief that willpower is limited procrastinate less. Instead, they focus more on how previous challenges can prepare them for future ones.

How you frame failure and delay can also raise or lower your motivation to get down to work. Focusing on very short term goals ("I will write 200 words") can prove more effective than focusing on the long term ones ("I will fulfill a childhood dream.")

Feeling that you are failing at a goal tied to your core values can stifle progress.

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR THOUGHTS AND SELF-TALK

You can still make progress while feeling discomfort by implementing these strategies:

1. What's the evidence that you can only work when you "feel like it?" Use your scholarly skills to test your assumptions about the limits of your capacity to get some writing done—even at the end of the day.
2. Consider other tasks you do even though you don't like them. All of us have unpleasant, boring, or even daunting tasks on our to do lists: washing clothes, talking with an undergraduate disputing a grade, going through airport security, cleaning up after others, etc. We do them anyway.
3. Use helpful self-talk to get back into action when you catch yourself making excuses: "I'm uncomfortable right now—but I am still able to describe my methodology or summarize these two articles. I will tolerate discomfort and see what happens."
4. Be on the lookout for the catastrophizing thoughts. "I'm never going to get a job if I can't finish this paragraph!" can be reframed to focus on a new, short-term strategy. Aim to deal with the small task at hand rather than slipping into demoralizing self-talk about the distant future: "It's just 50 words; I've done that plenty of times."

Design Your Attitudes and Intentions Carefully

Does positive thinking help us achieve our goals? Not necessarily.

While envisioning a smiling Dean bestowing your doctoral diploma, too much fantasizing can actually lower your ability to anticipate barriers and plan accordingly, asserts [Gabrielle Oettingen, Ph.D.](#)

The high you feel while fantasizing having reached your destination can easily trick your mind into thinking you have actually accomplished your goal—and lower motivation dramatically.

In order to be effective, Oettingen has concluded that you must also visualize the potential obstacles between you and your goal. Mentally contrasting the achievement fantasy with the inner as well as outer obstacles will energize you to become more realistic about your procrastination tendencies and create your plan accordingly.

Meanwhile researcher Peter Gollwitzer, Ph.D., has found that precommitting yourself to action is an unusually effective strategy for avoiding procrastination. Creating an "implementation intention" to complete a specific task at a specific time more than doubles the likelihood of follow through whether your goal is writing or sticking to a diet, writes Heidi Halvorson in [Success: How We Can Reach our Goals](#).

Also known as "if-then planning," such commitments also reduce emotional distress and decision fatigue. It is key to state the starting time or conditions, as in "If I have finished putting the dinner dishes in the dishwasher, then I will turn off my phone and summarize the next article for the literature review."

A simple "if-then" plan has a lot better chance of working than saying "I'll try to get some work done on my dissertation by the end of this week."

Spin your wheels less by doing the following:

1. Break down each aspect of your writing or research. Find the smallest component parts possible. Then identify the very first step you need to take to accomplish that subtask.
2. Schedule a specific time and place for doing that subtask.
3. Anticipate the inner as well as outer obstacles. What emotions, thoughts, and attitudes might get in the way of getting started on that subtask? Create a plan for how to overcome them, using the aforementioned strategies as necessary.

The next time you are tempted to stray from your dissertation journey, check your ETA—emotions, thinking, and attitudes—and take appropriate action to get back on course. Enjoy the satisfaction of moving one step closer to getting your doctorate!

Recommended Reading on Procrastination and Self-Regulation

- [Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength](#) by Roy Baumeister, Ph.D., and John Tierney
- [Success: How We Can Reach Our Goals](#) by Heidi Halvorson, Ph.D.
- [Rethinking Positive Thinking](#) by Gabrielle Oettingen, Ph.D.
- [Solving the Procrastination Puzzle](#) by Timothy Pynchyl, Ph.D.

Dr. Karen Forbes is a licensed psychologist and coach who specializes in working with individuals in higher education communities. She helps clients focus on solutions instead of on problems, clarify what they want instead of what they don't want, and do things now instead of later. Contact



her: Karen.Forbes@ActionStepsCoaching.com

YOUR OWN COACH

If you are considering whether to get your own coach to help you reach your academic goals, fill out this brief [application](#) for a free consultation with a dissertation coach.

GAYLE SCROGGS, Ph.D., P.C.C., Editor, ABDSG.

An accomplished coach, workshop leader, keynote speaker, and educator, Gayle earned her doctorate in social psychology from the University of New Hampshire. Her deep expertise in positive psychology allows her to help clients build their personal strengths, positive habits, and confidence to overcome procrastination, self-doubts and other blocks in order to reach vital academic and personal goals. In addition to editing the ABD Survival Guide, she contributed two chapters to the positive psychology anthology, [Women's Paths to Happiness](#). Contact her at gayle@essencecoaching.com for coaching, presentations, and workshops on thriving in graduate school and beyond, and find free resource www.essencecoaching.com. She also speaks fluent Spanish and delights in new exotic Scrabble words as she savors life in the Chesapeake Bay area, California, and Argentina.

BEN DEAN, Publisher, ABDSG

Ben holds a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Texas at Austin. He began writing the ABDSG in 1997. Over the years, the ABDSG has published hundreds of articles and provided thousands of hours of pro bono coaching and teleworkshops to ABDs all over the world. Ben is also the founder of MentorCoach (www.MentorCoach.com), a virtual university focused on training accomplished professionals to become part-time or full-time coaches. You may wish to subscribe to the Coaching Toward Happiness eNewsletter! It's on applying the science of Positive Psychology to your work and life (131,000 readers). Ben lives in suburban Maryland with his wife, Janice, their two children, and Dusty, their Norwegian dwarf bunny.

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Contact Us:

4400 East West Highway, Suite 1104, Bethesda, MD 20814
301-986-5688 | editor@mcpccoach.com

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