



# Mission Impossible: How to Avoid Procrastination

Helene Segura

# Does this in any way sound familiar?

Angela often feels stressed-out and tired because she stays up late finishing projects that are due the next day. Whether she has 24 hours or 24 days to complete a task, she puts off assignments until the last minute. Quite often she doesn't feel like thinking about the task, so she'll do other things in the meantime: work on something that was due the previous week, cruise the internet, work on low-value tasks, read at a café, or go shopping.

She always says she'll start earlier next time, but when next time comes around and she doesn't get crackin' right away, she'll say, "I work better under pressure anyway." And then the pattern repeats: stressful late-night work, followed by sleep-deprived mood swings the next day. She is beginning to feel worn down because she's doing this more often. Her personal relationships are being affected negatively, as well as her performance at work.

If this strikes a chord—a chord you'd like to change—then take heed so you can learn how to avoid procrastination.

# Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It:

Put aside the desire to have instant pleasure (and avoid tasks) in favor of completing not-so-pleasant tasks now, which will make life easier and happier for you in the future.

## Background Check: Why We Procrastinate

Here are some of the causes of procrastination:

We don't know how to do something. We're afraid to admit it, or we don't know where to learn how to do something, so we keep putting off the task.

We don't like doing something. "I don't wanna!"

We're overscheduled and overwhelmed. We've got so much going on that we don't know which way is up sometimes. This confuses our brains, and we don't know what to do next, or we think, "Why bother starting if I know I don't have time?" This overwhelm leads us to seek something easy to do—like checking email or going shopping.

We have to make a decision about something. For some, procrastination is a coping mechanism for difficulty with decision making. When decisions—whether earth-shatteringly important or completely insignificant in the grand scheme of things—are needed, taking on additional workloads, shopping, or spending too much time on tasks that don't take that long to complete are common avoidance strategies or crutches.

We've got some perfectionistic tendencies. We want everything to be exactly right. But we're not sure if what we're about to do will be perfectly right, so we avoid the task. If we don't start, then we can't screw it up.

We think, "I work better under pressure." Realize that the rush you feel when speeding through last-minute work is actually hurting your body because that rush is from cortisol. Consider a goal of replacing that rush with the feelings of relief and satisfaction you get by finishing something ahead of time. Those feelings don't cause kidney damage and obesity like cortisol does.

If you can recognize the causes of your task avoidance, this will help you be successful in your mission to learn how to avoid procrastination.

# Intel: What the Research Says

Those who procrastinate seek short-term, feel-good-now benefits, but they end up suffering long-term costs.

Task avoidance (procrastination) is a strategy to avoid negative emotions like fear and anxiety.

Our decision to procrastinate sabotages all our self-regulation and decision-making.

Procrastination has to do with control and self-regulation, and not so much time management.

Procrastination causes increased secretion of cortisol, which causes bad things to happen to us, including weight gain, lowered immunity, high blood pressure, kidney failure, and impaired brain function. (Procrastination kills. For real.)

Those who forgive themselves for their last instance of procrastination have a lower likelihood of procrastinating on the same task the next go-round.

Focusing on the happiness of our future self will help us to get through the present unpleasant emotions that are trying to block us from completing the task(s) in front of us.

# Types of Procrastination

Based on my consulting and coaching work, I have found that there are two types of procrastination:

**CHRONIC:** Chronic procrastinators will delay work on tasks on a daily or nearly daily basis. There may or may not be a pattern to the types of situations that spark the delays. The delays may feel like normal life to the chronic procrastinator, but this type of procrastination eventually leads to lost opportunities, lost income, damaged relationships, and problems with physical health. The chronic procrastinator outwardly displays self-deprecating humor about being a procrastinator, but internally there is a lot of pain. I've seen the anguish, witnessed the tears, and heard the heaving sobs when people in this situation are coming to terms with their current reality.

They know that their procrastination is hurting them, but they feel powerless to do anything about it. They've already tried all the tactical possibilities, and nothing—short of someone sitting next to them and making them do the task—works.

If you resonate with this, I need to tell you something that you may not want to hear but that deep down inside you already know. Medical experts who subscribe to the research that

finds that a lack of emotional self-regulation is the cause of procrastination recommend counseling and/or cognitive behavioral therapy. If you've honestly tried every strategy and tactic mentioned in this article, and your procrastination is still a major barrier to success, I encourage you to seek this type of assistance because your task avoidance goes beneath the surface of what mind management and time management tips and tricks can help you with.

**SITUATIONAL:** Situational procrastination happens to everyone. It's human nature. We all procrastinate at one time or another. No matter how much self-control and self-regulation we have, there are times when we just don't want to do something. If we were three years old, we'd throw a tantrum. But since we're adults, the tantrums have been replaced by task avoidance—procrastination.

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# Your Objective: Strategic Mind Games

According to psychologists, procrastination is the act of wanting to feel good now. Basically, procrastination is the adult version of a three-year-old's "I don't wanna!" tantrum.

Procrastination can make life miserable. If we put off projects, phone calls, emails, or whatever the task may be, we end up working at breakneck pace in order to complete it at the eleventh hour. It's unnecessary stress that we bring upon ourselves.

What if our goal could be to get ahead for today or tomorrow, instead of living in a frazzled state from constantly playing catch-up? Or does that shot of adrenaline that you feel when you're hurrying to finish a project feel good to you?

The research shows that overcoming procrastination comes down to thought control and self-regulation. It's all about mind management. Realizing that you're dragging your feet is the first key. Once this realization occurs, you're ready to play some strategic mind games with yourself.

You can ask yourself, "Do I want to get this task/job/misery over with and avoid kidney malfunction, weight gain, brain malfunction, stressing-out later, being in a bad mood, and snapping at everyone?"



You can ask yourself, “When tomorrow rolls around, would I like to feel proud of myself for getting the job done early, relieved that it’s over with already, and peaceful instead of panicked?”

You can tell yourself:

“I forgive myself for procrastinating last time. I can move forward now.”

“I’ll probably spend more time complaining about and avoiding this thing than it’ll actually take to finish it.”

“I’ll pretend that I’m doing this for my best friend. I know I’d do it for her if I said I would.”

Ask yourself, “How will not doing this right now make my life better?”

By playing these strategic mind games with yourself, you can cut back immensely on lost time and be successful in your mission to learn how to avoid procrastination.

*“The research shows that overcoming procrastination comes down to thought control and self-regulation. It’s all about mind management.”*

# Tactics: Your Weapons of Choice

Going ninja on your brain is like working with kids. Just when you think you've found the magical way to get them to listen or do their chores, the kids figure you out and stop responding to what you're doing. As the "make me happy now" part of your brain catches on to the self-regulation part of your brain, you might need to change up tactics now and then to keep this game fresh.

## **If you don't like doing something:**

- Do it first thing in the morning so that the rest of the day is a breeze.
- Arrange for a reward (a break or some kind of treat) upon completion.
- Set a timer and race against time.
- Play your fastest-paced current favorite song, and rock out while doing the task.
- Listen to the television or a YouTube video in the background.
- Listen to an audiobook as you work.
- Drown out all distractions with word-free classical music.
- Call a friend or coworker over so that you won't be alone while you do it.

- Hire someone else to do it, or trade out with a coworker.
- Sip on a li'l sumpin' sumpin' (insert your favorite beverage here) as you work.
- Do it naked. That's exciting! (And naughty. Which makes it doubly exciting!)  
Note: Only do this if you work from home!
- Tell yourself that you do like it, and trick your brain into a positive attitude.

### **If you're overscheduled and overwhelmed:**

- Break your tasks into smaller pieces.
- Have mini-deadlines (or “completion dates” if you don't like the word deadline) along the way for each of the pieces instead of one big one at the end.
- Stop adding to your calendar until further notice.
- Consider studying project management, which will help you plan out your timeline and necessary steps for completing projects.

### **If you have perfectionistic tendencies:**

- Accept that “good enough” is better than “not at all.”
- Do the first step in the project. Just starting will help you move past perfectionist worries.

### **If you think, “I work better under pressure”:**

- Working under pressure on a daily basis is detrimental to our health and body. (Warning: It has to do with cortisol, and it is not pretty!)
- Create an earlier deadline on your calendar. The conscious part of your brain will work toward making that happen. The subconscious part of your brain won’t go into stress mode, since it knows this is a false deadline and you actually have more time.

### **If you don’t know how to do something:**

- Ask for help right away.
- Back out of the project. It’s better to be honest with yourself and others before the project is due, rather than apologize for doing shoddy work—or doing nothing at all.
- Hire somebody to do it, or trade out with a coworker.

## **If you have to make a decision about something:**

- Set a due date for the decision.
- Set a maximum amount of time each day you'll spend thinking or researching.
- Research the pros and cons via the internet or speaking with a friend, colleague, or expert in that field.
- Or do all this in one day, and get it over with.

*“As the “make me happy now” part of your brain catches on to the self-regulation part of your brain, you might need to change up tactics now and then to keep this game fresh.*

# Contingency Plan: A Procrastination Crutch

No matter what our reasons are for procrastinating, if the act of procrastinating causes us to put things off and then hurry to get things done, we are placing ourselves in a stressful situation. When we get into a heightened state while cramming at the last minute to finish a task, our brains are releasing cortisol.

Cortisol makes us feel like we're empowered and energized and getting a high.

What we're really doing is wearing down our bodies. Cortisol has been found to cause high blood pressure, degeneration of cognitive functions, and weight gain, among other maladies. When these chemicals are released on a regular basis, it can also lead to kidney failure. We're programmed to use the chemicals to help us survive in life-or-death situations—not as a way to live life every day.

Even organized people occasionally procrastinate, so it's an unrealistic goal to say you'll never, ever, never, ever procrastinate again. The key for you is to reduce the frequency of your episodes. So how can you do that?

Procrastinate productively!

Yes, this entire article is about how not to procrastinate. But as I mentioned earlier, it's human nature to want to do it. We all procrastinate at some point. (Psssst. I want to do it occasionally, especially on boring tasks!) So, since we're not robots, and we will give in to task avoidance now and again, how can we make sure that we don't fall behind and still finish what we need to?

Answer: Procrastinate *productively*.

The most common form of procrastination is grabbing our smartphones or tablets to check email, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, or some other form of social media. Unless your job is social media, going down this rabbit hole for 20 minutes or an hour, or longer, won't move you ahead.

Instead, avoid one task by completing another. What else do you need to get done that's more enticing at that moment?

Wash the car?

Reconnect with your favorite client?

Write a proposal that's due next week?

Check next week's calendar and send out appointment reminders?

Go for a walk?

I teach my clients to choose their 3+3 for each day. These are the top three tasks they absolutely need to complete and the three next most important tasks they need to finish. 3+3. This formula will help you to procrastinate productively. When you don't want to complete Task 1 or Task 2, you can move to Task 3...or a task in the +3. You'll temporarily avoid an unsexy task, but you'll be getting something else done in the meantime.

Once you feel the success of getting a task crossed off your list, the "make me happy now" part of your brain will be pleased, and you'll be more willing to dive into the original task you avoided.

Yeah, mind games.

They really do work.

*“ Since we're not robots, and we will give in to task avoidance now and again, how can we make sure that we don't fall behind and still finish what we need to? ... Procrastinate productively.*



## Debrief: What happened to Angela?

Angela eventually cut back substantially on her procrastination. She tied her mind games to her personal priorities and targets. She was having money problems because her procrastination habit of shopping was becoming expensive, so her target was to spend only \$25 per week or \$100 per month on unplanned purchases. Her boyfriend was getting ready to break up with her, so she vowed to spend quality time with him every evening after 7 pm.

When she felt procrastination coming on, she'd ask herself: "Will procrastinating on this task keep me away from the stores and out of debt?" No, procrastinating will drive me further into debt, so I need to work on this project now.

Or, "Will procrastinating on this task support the relationship I want to have with my boyfriend?" No, it will only drive a deeper wedge between us and cause us to break up, so I need to work on this project now.

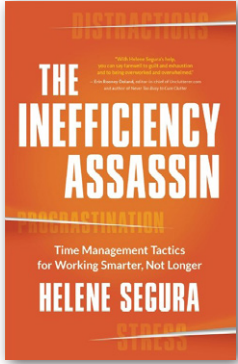
She used a timer and worked on unpleasant tasks for only 15 to 30 minutes at a time. Eventually, she realized that it wasn't the tasks that were so unpleasant; it was the negative by-product of procrastinating on the tasks that was so unpleasant. So, after a while, she actually looked forward to most of the projects.

## Take Action: Plot Your Next Steps

- If you procrastinate, what are the common causes? (This may take some digging and self-reflection to answer, but please do attempt to answer this eventually.)
- What does it feel like when you're about to procrastinate?
- When you catch yourself feeling that way, what steps will you take to cut back on procrastination?
- How much time will you save each day by cutting back on procrastination?

Make your goal to get ahead for today or tomorrow, instead of living in a frazzled state from constantly playing catch-up. **By understanding the causes of your task avoidance and applying the strategies and tactics presented to you here, you will be successful in your “how to avoid procrastination” quest.** 📌

# Info



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