



Put Off Procrastinating!!

Module 2

Understanding Procrastination Part II

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Introduction

So far we have looked at the definition of procrastination, the types of things people procrastinate about, what people do instead of the task at hand when they procrastinate, and the types of excuses people use to justify their procrastination. However, something that people always want to know is, “why do I procrastinate?” People will often say “I know it isn’t good for me, I know it just makes things worse, yet I keep doing it....why?????” So let’s have a look at the underlying reasons for procrastination. But as we do this remember, we take the approach that whilst it is very helpful to understand the reason you procrastinate, it often isn’t essential for overcoming procrastination. In later Modules you will learn practical strategies for overcoming procrastination, that work regardless of what the underlying reason is for your procrastination.

Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

We come from the point of view that the core reasons people procrastinate have something to do with the way they see themselves and the world. We all have rules and assumptions by which we live our lives. For example, I might have the rule that “it is important to be kind to others whenever possible” or the assumption that “if I commit a crime, then I will be punished”. These rules and assumptions seem pretty *helpful* in the sense that they are fairly accurate in capturing how things really are (i.e., it is typically true that punishment follows a crime), and they are also flexible (i.e., it is not always going to be possible to be kind to others 100% of the time, but doing so whenever possible is reasonable). However, we can also have more unhelpful rules and assumptions by which we try to lead our lives. A rule or assumption tends to be *unhelpful* when they are inaccurate and inflexible in some way. At the heart of procrastination lies certain **Unhelpful Rules/Assumptions**, we call these the “shoulds”, “musts” and “can’ts”. Below are the most common unhelpful rules and assumptions linked to procrastination.

Need To Be In Charge

Some people have rules like “I *must* be in charge at all times”, “I *must* always call the shots in my life”, “Things *should* be done my way”, “I *shouldn’t* have to do things that I don’t want to do”, or “I *shouldn’t* have to do things just because someone else says so”. These rules reflect the type of person who resents not being in control, not being independent or not holding the power. This person often assumes that “if I am not 100% in charge of what I do, then I am weak”. You can imagine that for this person, when they are faced with a task they don’t want to do that is imposed on them by someone else (e.g., a supervisor, teacher, family member, partner), then they will feel angry and resentful because they see themselves as not in control. They may then use procrastination as a way of easing their anger and sense of weakness, and helping them feel like they do have the power, because they are doing (or not doing) the task on their own terms.



Pleasure Seeking

Some people live their lives according to the principle that pleasure is paramount. They are impulsive, seek out pleasure and have difficulty tolerating boredom. These people may have rules like “life is too short to be doing things that are boring or hard, fun *should* always come first”. They may have assumptions like “if I forgo fun, then I will become a boring lifeless drone”. These rules and assumptions reflect a need for instant gratification, and a difficulty accepting ideas like “short term pain for long term gain”. For this person it is hard to look beyond the short term, and be patient enough to wait for any long term pay off. You can imagine that for this person, when faced with an uninteresting task (e.g., work project, assignment, household chore, doing the weekly budget), they will feel frustrated and bored. They may then use procrastination as a way of alleviating boredom and frustration, and helping them seek out the pleasure they so desire.

Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval

Some people put a lot of pressure on themselves to complete tasks or goals to a very high standard, sometimes even demanding perfection of themselves. The problem is that when they demand such extraordinary efforts, they often fear that they will fall short, and conclude that they will either fail or someone will disapprove of them. These types of people may have rules like "I *must* do things perfectly", "I *must* not fail", or "I *can't* have others think poorly of me". They may have assumptions like "if I try, then I will only fail", or "if I put my work out there, then others will think badly of me". You can imagine for this person, when faced with a task that is going to be evaluated in some way (e.g., exam, report, art work, socialising, making a lifestyle change), they predict they will fail or others will judge them negatively, and as such they feel anxious, fearful or embarrassed. Their fears may paralyse them from being able to do the task, and procrastination may be used as a way of avoiding their fears of failure or disapproval. That is, a motivation for their procrastination may be that you can't fail or be judged negatively by others, if you never follow through on the task in the first place. As an aside, another underlying reason for procrastination that is often mentioned is **fear of success**, which often is really a delayed fear of failure in disguise (e.g., "if I succeed, then more will be expected of me and I won't be able to cut it").

Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe

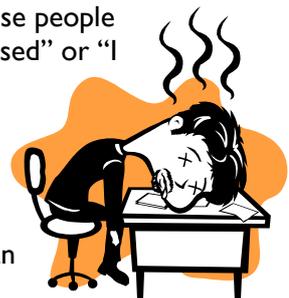
Some people fear the unknown. They need to be very certain of what lies ahead, and if they are uncertain they may predict catastrophe as a way of preparing themselves should the worst happen. These types of people may have rules like "I *must* be certain" or "I *should* be prepared for the worst". They may hold assumptions like "if I take action, then something bad will happen" or "I am better off not doing anything than risk it going bad". In life it is hard to be 100% certain about anything, so when faced with tasks or goals where uncertainty lies (e.g., decision making, health check-ups, confronting a relationship problem), these people will feel very anxious and fearful. They may then use procrastination as a way of alleviating their fear, by putting off any action that could lead to an unknown or catastrophic outcome. In this way their procrastination ensures nothing changes for the mean time, and hence if nothing changes, nothing bad can happen at least for now, so they temporarily feel more certain about things. In addition, **fear of success** mentioned above can also be a fear of uncertainty in disguise (e.g., "if I succeed, then everything will change, and what if it is for the worse").

Low Self-Confidence

Some people don't think much of themselves generally. They doubt their abilities, and lack confidence that they are capable individuals who can tackle tasks or goals that come their way. These types of people may have rules like "I *can't* do things because I am incapable" or assumptions like "if I try things, then my inadequacies will show through". For these types of people, when faced with a task that requires some self-confidence to tackle it (e.g. taking on new work responsibilities, starting a new course or hobby, confronting a family member), these people will have no self-belief that they can do it, and hence will feel depressed and despairing. They may then use procrastination as a way of not having to face that they can't do something because of their flaws. As such by not trying or by giving up at a task, they avoid having to see their supposed incapability's and inadequacies, because they never put themselves in challenging situations to truly see what they are made of.

Depleted Energy

Some people don't think they are capable when life becomes tough. That is, under certain circumstances, they don't believe they have the ability to complete tasks and fulfil goals. Some of these circumstances are: when they are *stressed* because there are a lot of competing demands in their life; when they are physically or mentally *fatigued* in some way; when their *motivation* is low and they don't have the inspiration to do things; or when they are *depressed* and aren't in the mood to get things done. These people have rules like "I *can't* do things when I am stressed/ fatigued/ unmotivated/ depressed" or "I *must* rest when my energy is low" or assumptions like "if I do things when I am stressed/ fatigued/ unmotivated/ depressed, I will make things worse". For these people, when they are faced with a task at a time when their energy is depleted, they will feel exhausted and possibly despairing and frustrated, because they believe they can't do it. They may then use procrastination as a way of trying to rebuild energy and get rid of their exhaustion, with the idea that if I rest rather than do, things will somehow get better.



Put Off Procrastinating!!

Now, being a procrastinator doesn't mean you have all six of these unhelpful rules and assumptions just mentioned. You may only possess one of these, some combination of them, or a less common unhelpful rule or assumption. Also different unhelpful rules and assumptions may be relevant for different types of procrastination situations. So which of these unhelpful rules and assumptions do you most identify with? Think of all your past examples of procrastination, reflecting on the examples captured in your notebook from the last Module and past times of procrastination that really stand out in your mind. When you think about these past times, was your procrastination related to: needing to be in charge, wanting to seek pleasure, fearing failure or disapproval by others, fearing uncertainty or catastrophe, having low confidence in yourself, or having problems with your energy levels?

To help you work out which unhelpful rules and assumptions you live by, try filling out the quiz below. Highlight the statements you most identify with, as these might be a clue as to the unhelpful rules and assumptions that apply most to you.

| Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions Quiz | |
|---|--|
| <p>Need To Be In Charge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I must be in charge at all times <input type="checkbox"/> Things should be done my way <input type="checkbox"/> I shouldn't have to do things that I don't want to <input type="checkbox"/> I shouldn't have to do things because someone else says so <input type="checkbox"/> If I am not 100% in charge of what I do, then I am weak | <p>Pleasure Seeking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Life is too short to be doing things that are boring or hard <input type="checkbox"/> Fun should always come first <input type="checkbox"/> Life should be fun at all times <input type="checkbox"/> Pleasure here & now should be all that matters <input type="checkbox"/> If I forgo fun, then I will become a boring lifeless drone |
| <p>Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I must do things perfectly <input type="checkbox"/> I must not fail <input type="checkbox"/> I can't have others think poorly of me <input type="checkbox"/> If I try, then I will only fail <input type="checkbox"/> If I put my work out there, then others will think badly of me | <p>Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I must be certain of what will happen <input type="checkbox"/> I should be prepared for the worst <input type="checkbox"/> I can't stand not knowing the outcome <input type="checkbox"/> If I take action, then something bad will happen <input type="checkbox"/> I am better off not doing anything, than risk it going bad |
| <p>Low Self-Confidence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I can't do things because I am incapable <input type="checkbox"/> I'm too inadequate so I can't get things done <input type="checkbox"/> If I try things, then my inadequacies will show through <input type="checkbox"/> I shouldn't try things when I know I'm no good <input type="checkbox"/> If I know I won't be able to do something, then I shouldn't bother | <p>Depleted Energy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I can't do things when I am stressed/ fatigued/ unmotivated/ depressed <input type="checkbox"/> I must rest when my energy is low <input type="checkbox"/> I must be energised to be able to do things <input type="checkbox"/> If I do things when I am stressed/ fatigued/ unmotivated/ depressed, I will make things worse <input type="checkbox"/> If I do things when I am not energised, then it won't work out |

So, what are your unhelpful rules that lead you to procrastinate? That is, what do you expect from yourself or life that leads you to put off important things?

I must... _____

I should... _____

I can't... _____

And, what are your unhelpful assumptions that lead you to procrastinate? That is, what do you expect will happen if you actually attempt the types of tasks you procrastinate on?

If I... _____ then... _____

It may be hard to work out what your unhelpful rules and assumptions are, but give it a go. If you struggle with this don't worry. Remember, we said earlier that to overcome procrastination you don't always need to know the exact underlying reason for your procrastination.

Consequences Of Procrastination

Procrastination carries with it a number of consequences depending on the situation. Some of these consequences might be considered to be positive, whilst some are negative. The main thing to know is that these consequences actually keep you procrastinating. The **Positive Consequences**, or in other words the pay-offs for procrastinating, understandably are going to make you more likely to procrastinate next time you face the task or goal, because you got something good out of procrastinating and procrastination worked for you in some way. At the same time the **Negative Consequences** often make the situation worse in some way, making the task or goal even harder or more unpleasant in many senses, and this also makes you more likely to continue procrastinating on the task or goal next time. Let's have a closer look at some of the positive and negative consequences of procrastination.

Positive Consequences

Relieve Discomfort. A positive consequence of procrastinating is that it often initially relieves discomfort you may have about approaching or following through with a task. You will have noticed that each of the six unhelpful rules and assumptions mentioned before, tend to lead to some feeling of discomfort when faced with a task or goal. This discomfort might be anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion and so on. You will have also noticed from our previous discussion that procrastination can often work to alleviate this discomfort in some way, because procrastination allows you to avoid the task that is making you feel uncomfortable. So if you don't like feeling uncomfortable, the relief procrastination can bring is going to make procrastination look like an attractive option for you in the future. The notion that procrastination is really a strategy for avoiding discomfort that arises because we have unhelpful rules and assumptions, is important and will be explained further in the next Module.

Stick To Your Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions. Another positive to procrastinating is that by doing so you feel better for having stuck to your unhelpful rules and assumptions. For example, by procrastinating you may feel one of the following things because you have abided by your rules:

- **Need To Be In Charge:** an increased sense of power and control because you are doing things on your own terms;
- **Pleasure Seeking:** an increased sense of pleasure, because you are living for the moment;
- **Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval:** a reduced likelihood of failure or disapproval from someone else, because you haven't put yourself out there to be evaluated in anyway;
- **Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe:** an increased sense of certainty or that you have averted catastrophe, because nothing has changed in your life that could tempt fate;
- **Low Self-Confidence:** your self-image stays intact, because you haven't challenged yourself and potentially revealed your incapability's or inadequacies;
- **Depleted Energy:** you think you are doing the right thing to replenish your energy, because you are taking it easy on yourself and avoiding challenges.

Gain Pleasure. A final positive consequence of procrastinating is that the activities you engage in as a substitute for doing the task at hand (e.g., pleasurable tasks, lower priority tasks, socialising, distractions, daydreaming), will often be pleasurable in themselves. The pleasure you get from these diversions, will have their own pay off.



Negative Consequences

More Discomfort. Although under the positive consequences, procrastination has the potential to relieve discomfort about doing a task that arises from your unhelpful rules and assumptions, on the down side procrastination can also produce a different sort of discomfort. Often the more you procrastinate the more you might feel guilty or ashamed of your actions. You may feel more anxious, because the task is getting worse and more overwhelming the longer you put it off. You may feel despair, as the longer you don't do it the more you think you can't tackle it.

Your Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions Stay Intact. The unhelpful rules and assumptions you have, which are the very reason for your procrastination, tend to stay intact the more you procrastinate. When you procrastinate, you avoid engaging in tasks and goals that have the potential to challenge your rules and assumptions, and allow you to see that they may not be accurate or flexible for different situations. For example, by procrastinating you never learn the following about your rules and assumptions:

- **Need To Be In Charge:** you can tolerate doing things you don't want to or that someone else has told you to do at times, and that when you do these things it doesn't make you weak at all, but a normal functioning member of society;
- **Pleasure Seeking:** you can tolerate boredom and frustration, and that at times short term boredom will be worthwhile in the long run and will make your pleasurable times even sweeter;
- **Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval:** you can do things imperfectly and not fail or be judged badly, and generally it is very seldom that you outright fail or get judged poorly, and on the rare occasion this does happen you can tolerate this and move forward;
- **Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe:** uncertainty is a part of life that everyone has to tolerate, and not taking action just keeps you stuck and stagnant, rather than making anything more certain or preventing a catastrophe. On the whole things work out OK, and on the times they don't there are things you can do to cope and survive;
- **Low Self-Confidence:** you can do more than you give yourself credit for, you are not incapable or inadequate, but merely have strengths and weakness just like anyone;
- **Depleted Energy:** you can do more than you think when your energy is low, and your energy, stress, motivation and mood often improve the more you tackle things step by step, rather than rest.

Self-Criticism Backfires. People will often beat themselves up and become highly self-critical as a consequence of their procrastination. They will say things to themselves like "you lazy so and so, pull yourself together and get started, you know you should do this!" The intention of doing this is often to motivate yourself into action, sort of a 'tough love' approach. However, this generally backfires as the more you chastise yourself, the more the task or goal feels like a chore, and the more unmotivated you will feel, hence the more you will keep procrastinating. If you don't believe us, think of how you might motivate a child or a good friend to do a task? Would you be harsh and yell at them? Or would you be encouraging and praising?

Things Pile Up. The more you put something off, the more tasks pile up around you, the more demands you have to meet, and the more time pressures you face. Deadlines generally don't change, but now the time you have to do things is less. The more things pile up in this way, the more overwhelming and aversive the task becomes, and hence the more you want to avoid it by procrastinating.



Punishment Or Loss. As a result of not having done a task or goal, you may experience some sort of punishment or loss from the environment around you. For example, you may lose your job or a relationship, you may get a bad mark on an assignment, the health checks you have to do may be even more unpleasant the longer you wait, and by not making a decision great opportunities might pass you by. The punishments or losses you may experience can make it harder for you to keep going, persist and follow through. They can make the situation more aversive and hence you will be more likely to give up by procrastinating.

Put Off Procrastinating!!

Which of the positive and negative consequences do you most identify with? Think of all your past examples of procrastination you have so far been analysing. Jot down any positive consequences and negative consequences you experienced as a result of your procrastination, and reflect on how both the positives and negatives have kept you procrastinating over the longterm.

| Positive Consequences | Negative Consequences |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | |
| How Do These Keep Me Procrastinating? | How Do These Keep Me Procrastinating? |
| | |

Module Summary

- People procrastinate because they hold certain unhelpful rules and assumptions. These rules and assumptions may relate to themes like needing to be in charge, pleasure seeking, fear of failure or disapproval, fear of uncertainty or catastrophe, low self-confidence and depleted energy.
- The rules often take the form of statements like “I should...”, “I must...” or “I can’t...” The assumptions often take the form of “If..., then...” statements. Rules and assumptions are unhelpful when they are inaccurate and inflexible.
- The unhelpful rules and assumptions that are linked to procrastination often generate some type of discomfort about doing a task or goal, and procrastination then becomes a strategy to avoid the discomfort.
- The positive consequences of procrastination, such as relief from discomfort, feeling good for having stuck to one’s unhelpful rules and assumptions, and gaining pleasure from procrastination activities, are all pay-offs that keep procrastination going next time.
- The negative consequences of procrastination, such as creating more discomfort, preserving one’s unhelpful rules and assumptions, being self-critical, piling up tasks, and punishment or loss from the environment, all keep procrastination going because it makes the task or goal even more aversive, so next time procrastination looks like an attractive option.



Coming up next ...

In the next module we will draw together what we have learned so far into a cycle of how procrastination works, and from this look at how you go about changing procrastination.

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for procrastination is based on the approach that procrastination is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

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These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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