



Put Off Procrastinating!!

Module 6

Adjusting Unhelpful Rules/Assumptions & Tolerating Discomfort

Introduction	2
Adjusting Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions	2
Needing To Be In Charge	2
Pleasure Seeking	3
Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval	4
Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe	5
Low Self-Confidence	5
Depleted Energy	6
Worksheet: Adjusting Unhelpful Rules/Assumptions	7
Tolerating Discomfort	8
Module Summary	10

Introduction

Given you know how to dismiss your procrastination excuses (see Module 4) and have some real practical strategies for tackling your procrastination behaviour (see Module 5), you now have the key things you need to overcome procrastinating and start doing. However, you may still wish to tackle the underlying reasons for your procrastination. As we have emphasised before, doing this is not always necessary to beat the habit of procrastination. However, it can have its benefits. The important thing to remember is that the underlying reasons for your procrastination are harder to shift, and may require more intensive work with a mental health professional who specialises in cognitive-behavioural therapy. Below are some tips to get you started, to give you a feel for what you need to do to overcome your unhelpful rules and assumptions and your intolerance of discomfort, which are the real reasons for your procrastination. For some people, the tips in this Module may be enough. However, for others this Module will at least give you a sense of whether you want to pursue this type of work further with a professional.

Adjusting Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

There are a series of steps you can go through to challenge the unhelpful rules and assumptions that give rise to your procrastination. These steps include: i) clearly identifying what your unhelpful rule or assumption is and recognising where it might have come from; ii) questioning whether your unhelpful rule or assumption is reasonable? realistic? fair? helpful? and recognising the negative consequences of having this unhelpful rule or assumption; iii) identifying a more helpful rule or assumption you could try to adopt; and iv) planning how you would need to act in every day life to put this new helpful rule or assumption into practice.

When working out where your rules and assumptions might have come from, this will often involve messages or sayings you have received from others around you, past experiences you have had, or how you have observed others approach life. Often these things will have occurred whilst growing up, but can also come from more recent experiences. When generating a more helpful rule or assumption, this involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is more balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of affairs. When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, this involves working out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to take it on board and believe it.

On page 7 is a general worksheet to guide you through each of the steps, so you can adjust the unhelpful rule or assumption that has been interfering with the tasks or goals you have been working on in these Modules. If you have identified more than one unhelpful rule or assumption, then you will need to tackle each, one at a time. Below are some examples of how to go through the steps to adjust each unhelpful rule and assumption identified in Module 2 as most common to procrastination.

Needing To Be In Charge

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?

It may be something like:

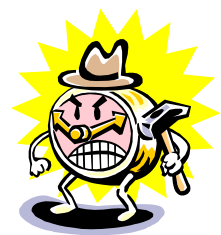
I must be in charge at all times

Things should be done my way

I shouldn't have to do things that I don't want to

I shouldn't have to do things because someone else says so

If I am not 100% in charge of what I do, then I am weak



Where did this rule or assumption come from?

Possibly:

- Messages or sayings I received growing up from either family, others around me, or society (e.g., “you need to be top dog to get any respect in this world” or “it’s my way or the highway”).
- Past experiences of being dominated by others, and vowing never to be in that same position again.
- Seeing the benefits that people in positions of power received.

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

To get along in society you are going to need to follow someone else’s orders at some point. No matter how high up you are, there is always going to be someone higher. Give and take is necessary for society to function. We all have to do things we don’t particularly like doing at certain times, it is a part of life. It is simply not possible to be in control and hold the power at all times.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?

I alienate others, it creates conflict with people around me, I get aggressive, I don’t get promoted because I don’t get along with others or follow their instructions.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption?

It may be something like:

I can tolerate doing things I don’t want to

It is ok to follow other people at times

Doing things that don’t suit me doesn’t make me weak, but a normal functioning member of society

Things don’t have to always be my way

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

Follow someone else’s orders. Do things I don’t want to. Give some power and control over to someone else for a change. Don’t be independent and in charge all the time, but instead ask for help at times.

Pleasure Seeking

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?

It may be something like:

Life is too short to be doing things that are boring or hard

Fun should always come first

Life should be fun at all times

Pleasure here and now should be all that matters

If I forgo fun, then I will become a boring lifeless drone



Where did this rule or assumption come from?

Possibly:

- Messages I received growing up that fun was a priority (e.g., “don’t be a party pooper”).
- Past experiences of being deprived of fun and pressured to work hard, and as such vowing never to live life like that again.
- Observing in others the negative consequences of being a workaholic, and rebelling against that lifestyle.
- My achievements not being valued by others or not seeing others around me striving to achieve.

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

To get anywhere in life is going to involve some hard work, achievement or sacrifice at certain points. If life is only about fun, we get stuck and don’t get to where we want to be in life. We all have to put up with some boredom at times, it is a part of life.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?

Things don’t get done, I don’t move forward, I stay stuck whilst watching others around me progress, I feel left behind and dissatisfied with my life achievements.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption?

It may be something like:

- I can tolerate short term boredom for long term gain
- Pleasurable times are often more enjoyable after I have achieved something
- Fun and achievement are equally important

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

Plan fun things after I have achieved something. Practice forgoing fun temporarily to get a task achieved. Practice doing mundane or boring tasks for increasing periods of time to build tolerance and patience. Plan a balance between the proportion of fun and achievement activities in my week.

Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?

It may be something like:

- I must do things perfectly
- I must not fail
- I can't have others think poorly of me
- If I try, then I will only fail
- If I put my work out there, then others will think badly of me



Where did this rule or assumption come from?

Possibly:

- Messages and sayings growing up from the people around me (e.g., “unless you are first, you are last”, “perfection is a virtue”, “you have to give 110%”).
- Being criticised when I didn't do well at something.
- Only ever being praised when I did exceptionally well.
- Past experiences of not doing well or failing at something.

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

Perfection is unattainable, as imperfection is inevitable. It is more realistic to expect to do well at certain things, mediocre at others things, and not so well at some things – it all evens out in the end. It isn't so black and white that things are either a success or failure. People generally aren't out to judge everything we do, they are often more wrapped up in themselves. Constructive criticism is a part of learning.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?

I feel afraid about doing things, I predict failure and disapproval constantly, I don't get things done or I waste time trying to get things perfect, I don't try, I don't put myself 'out there'.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption?

It may be something like:

- Imperfection is part of being human
- Doing things imperfectly doesn't always lead to failure or disapproval
- On the whole I do things well and don't fail or get judged poorly
- I can tolerate not doing well or receiving some criticism

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

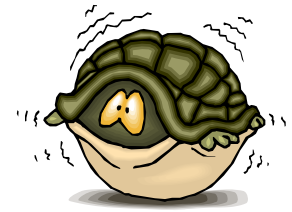
Plan to do things imperfectly (e.g., purposely make a mistake and see what happens). Aim for a 'good enough' job, rather than perfection, and see if I can be OK with this. Purposely try to generate some form of criticism from others, and practice being able to tolerate it.

Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?

It may be something like:

- I must be certain of what will happen
- I should be prepared for the worst
- I can't stand not knowing the outcome
- If I take action, then something bad will happen
- I am better off not doing anything, than risk it going bad



Where did this rule or assumption come from?

Possibly:

- Messages growing up (e.g., "a good scout is always prepared")
- Having an unstable and unpredictable life growing up, and vowing that life will never be like that again.
- Past experiences of having suffered some catastrophe or trauma in my life.

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

It is impossible to be certain about everything. Some degree of uncertainty is a part of life we all have to tolerate. Not taking action or worrying about things, doesn't make anything more certain and doesn't prevent a catastrophe.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?

I feel afraid about doing things, I predict catastrophe constantly, I worry, I don't take action, I avoid, I stay within my 'comfort zone'.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption?

It may be something like:

- Uncertainty is a part of life that everyone has to tolerate
- Catastrophes are unlikely events
- I can take action and cope with any consequences that arise
- I can cope if bad things happen, and worrying about it doesn't prevent it

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

Take action or make decisions, and see what happens. If something doesn't go well, use it as an opportunity to practice being able to cope with that.

Low Self-Confidence

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?

It may be something like:

- I can't do things because I am incapable
- I'm too inadequate so I can't get things done
- If I try things, then my inadequacies will show through
- I shouldn't try things when I know I'm no good
- If I know I won't be able to do something, then I shouldn't bother



Where did this rule or assumption come from?

Possibly:

- Criticism from others growing up or later in life (e.g., "you are no good", "you will never amount to anything")
- Lack of praise or recognition from others for my abilities.
- Past experiences of attempting things and them not turning out well.

Put Off Procrastinating!!

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

I don't take into account both my strengths and weaknesses, but am biased and unfair towards myself by just focusing on my weaknesses. I just assume I can't do things, rather than finding out for real.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?

I don't try or attempt things, I give up easily, I feel down about myself, I criticise myself.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption?

It may be something like:

- I can do more than I give myself credit for
- I have strengths and weakness just like anyone
- I am capable and adequate in most things

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

Don't back away from challenges. Try new things. Give things a go and see how I do. Pay attention to my strengths and achievements (e.g., write them down each day).

Depleted Energy

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?

It may be something like:

- I can't do things when I am stressed/ fatigued/ unmotivated/ depressed
- I must rest when my energy is low
- I must be energised to be able to do things
- If I do things when I am stressed/ fatigued/ unmotivated/ depressed,
I will make things worse
- If I do things when I am not energised, then it won't work out



Where did this rule or assumption come from?

Possibly:

- Past experiences of people in my life not challenging or pushing me during tough times, but telling me to "take it easy" and treating me as fragile.
- Past experiences of people pushing me too much when my energy was low, and vowing never to do that to myself again.
- Seeing others manage stress, fatigue, poor motivation and depression by taking it easy.
- Having overdone things at some point in my life, which led to a negative outcome (e.g., nervous breakdown).

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

I never test myself in different situations to see I can manage and get some things done at certain times. We are often not going to be in the right frame of mind to do things, and if we wait for the right frame of mind it may never come, and we will never get anything done.

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?

I don't get things done, I view myself as fragile, I can't live a normal routine, I can't take on a variety of commitments, I feel restricted in what I can do.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption?

It may be something like:

- I can do more than I think when my energy is low
- Energy, stress, motivation and mood often improve if I tackle things step by step, rather than rest
- Rest often de-energises me
- Rest is not always the answer, often taking action is

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

Try taking action rather than resting when I feel stressed/fatigued/unmotivated/depressed, and see what happens. Break tasks into steps and start with just one step when my energy is low, and see where it leads.

Adjusting Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?

Where did this rule or assumption come from?

In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?

What is an alternative more helpful (i.e., balanced, flexible, realistic) rule or assumption?

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

Tolerating Discomfort

As has been highlighted in Module 3, your unhelpful rules and assumptions when activated, tend to generate some form of discomfort about doing a task or goal. Now, if you particularly hate, detest or can't stand discomfort, you are going to be more likely to procrastinate as a way of avoiding the discomfort. This puts you in a mode where you are 'discomfort driven', that is, you react from your discomfort, and it is your discomfort that guides your behaviour and calls all the shots.

Not being able to stand discomfort is often referred to as being 'discomfort intolerant'. Hence, something that can be helpful when addressing procrastination, is to increase your tolerance for discomfort. That is, to adopt the attitude that "I don't like discomfort, but I can stand it, I can stay with it, and I can get through it...I can tolerate it!!!" If you can adopt this attitude, you will be less tempted to turn to procrastination as a way of stopping the discomfort.

Below are some suggestions you can practice to increase your ability to tolerate discomfort. These suggestions come from mindfulness meditation principles. Mindfulness involves being in the present moment and being a non-judgemental observer of your experience. So when it comes to discomfort, it means that you observe the discomfort in a detached manner, without trying to change it or buy into it, without struggling with it or trying to get rid of it, but just watching it as it is. Often when people do this, they find that paradoxically it lessens how uncomfortable they feel, and allows them to feel they can tolerate their discomfort. Now, mindfulness and tolerating discomfort is a skill, and like any skill it requires practice. The more practice, the better you will get at it. Don't expect it to work overnight, as you will need to persist and stick with it. It may also be a good idea to practice the art of just watching your experience in the present moment when you are not distressed, so you will be better practiced at using this approach when you are distressed, which can be harder to do.

Steps To Mindfully Increasing Your Discomfort Tolerance

Be Aware

Firstly, bring a gentle awareness to what it is that you are experiencing right now in the present moment. If you are practicing when you are not distressed, this may be noticing your *breath*, noticing sensations *in your body*, noticing sensations *outside your body* as it makes contact with the surrounding environment, noticing *sounds* around you, noticing *sights* around you, noticing something you are *tasting*, noticing *emotions* you are experiencing, or noticing *thoughts* that are popping into your mind. Bring awareness to anything sensory that is happening right now.



If you are distressed when practicing, notice and bring awareness to the discomfort itself, whether it be anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion, etc.

Watch, Observe, No-Judgement

Once aware of your experience, adopt the stance of being an observer or watcher of your experience. An observer or watcher doesn't try to change what is happening, but at the same time doesn't get 'caught up' nor 'buys into' what is happening. They just stand at a distance from the action...just watching. Try to be a non-judgemental observer, that is, not to judge your experience as either good nor bad, it is what it is. To help you be non-judgemental in your watching, it can be helpful to label your experience like..."here is a thought", or "here is a body sensation", or "here is a feeling", etc. For example, thinking "I am not doing this mindfulness practice right" would be a judgement, instead labelling that as "just a thought", is taking a non-judgemental attitude.

Again, if you are distressed when practicing, just watch and observe in a non-judgemental way your discomfort. You might use labels like...“here is the feeling of anger”, “here is the feeling of boredom”, “here is the feeling of despair” and so on. Try to relate to them as “just feelings, nothing more and nothing less”. Remind yourself that “you are not your feelings, and that you are bigger than your feelings”. If thoughts like “I can’t stand this feeling” pop up, again just watch it as “a mere thought”.

Let Go

If you allow your experience to just be as it is, chances are that because you have let it come into your space (rather than having battled and struggled with it), it will then be able to go and leave your space in its own time. To help you with this, you might try using your breath to let go. Breathe from wherever you feel the discomfort within you. Breathe into the discomfort, making a space for it and allowing it to be there. You may then be able to watch the discomfort leave with your breath, each time you exhale. If the discomfort does move on, it doesn’t mean it won’t come back. When the discomfort does rear its head again, know that it is OK, and again just bring awareness to it, watch and observe it in a non-judgemental fashion, and then allow it to leave again when it is ready.

Other Ways to Increase Discomfort Tolerance

Ride the Wave of Discomfort

Similar to mindfulness is riding the wave of discomfort. Our emotions usually act like waves, rising and gaining height at certain points, then tapering off and dropping back, then sometimes gradually rising again. Imagine your discomfort as a wave. Like a wave the discomfort is temporary, it doesn’t go on forever, and at some point will slowly subside. Imagine yourself riding the wave like a surfer until you come into shore, or imagine yourself bobbing gently in the ocean with each wave that rolls in, being carried upwards at certain points and gently back down again. If you can relate to your discomfort as a wave that rises and falls, then you may feel more able to tolerate it, as you know it won’t go on forever, and you will come down the other side of the wave eventually.



Gradually Delay Procrastination & Increase Discomfort

Another option for increasing your ability to tolerate discomfort, is to gradually increase the amount of time you experience discomfort prior to procrastinating. In other words, delaying procrastination and hence increasing your time sitting with discomfort. For example, if the discomfort you detest is boredom, and procrastination is your way of escaping boredom, pick a specific amount of time for which you are going to allow yourself to experience the boredom before procrastinating. Initially 10 minutes may be all you can stand, then increase the time to 15 minutes, then 20 minutes, and so on. The idea being to gradually increase the amount of time you expose yourself to your own discomfort, gradually building up a tolerance each time.

Module Summary

- You don't necessarily need to change your unhelpful rules and assumptions and discomfort intolerance to overcome procrastination. Modules 4 and 5 on dismissing procrastination excuses and using practical behavioural strategies to stop procrastination, are often enough to kick the habit.
- Changing the unhelpful rules and assumptions and discomfort intolerance that give rise to your procrastination can be hard, and you may require further professional assistance beyond these Modules to address these issues.
- Adjusting your unhelpful rules and assumptions requires going through the following steps:
 - Clearly identifying what your unhelpful rule or assumption is and recognising where it might have come from;
 - Questioning whether your unhelpful rule or assumption is reasonable? realistic? fair? helpful? and recognising the negative consequences of having this unhelpful rule or assumption;
 - Identifying a more helpful rule or assumption you could try to adopt; and
 - Planning how you would need to act in every day life to put this new helpful rule or assumption into practice.
- Increasing your tolerance of discomfort can be achieved by practicing skills such as, mindfulness (i.e., be aware, watch, observe, no-judgement, let go), relating to your discomfort as riding a wave of emotion, and gradually delaying procrastination and hence increasing the amount of time you sit with discomfort.



Coming up next ...

In the next module we will put together everything you have learned so far, giving you a clear plan of how to keep working on conquering procrastination.

About The Modules

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr Lisa Saulsman (MPsych¹; PhD²)
Centre for Clinical Interventions

Paula Nathan (MPsych¹)
Director, Centre for Clinical Interventions
Adjunct Senior Lecturer, School of Psychiatry and Clinical
Neuroscience, The University of Western Australia

¹Masters of Psychology (Clinical Psychology)

²Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

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.

REFERENCES

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

Bernard, M.E. (1991). *Procrastinate Later! How To Motivate Yourself To Do It Now*. Australia: Schwartz & Wilkinson.

Burka, J.B., & Yuen, L.M. (1983). *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What To Do About It*. US: DaCapo Press.

Ellis, A., & Knaus, W.J. (1977). *Overcoming Procrastination*. New York: Signet.

Fiore, N. (1989). *The Now Habit: A Strategic Program For Overcoming Procrastination And Enjoying Guilt-Free Play*. New York: Penguin Group.

Knaus, W.J. (1979). *Do It Now: How To Stop Procrastinating*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

Knaus, W. (2002). *The Procrastination Workbook: Your Personalized Program For Breaking Free From The Patterns That Hold You Back*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications Inc.

“PUT OFF PROCRASTINATING”

This module forms part of:

Saulsman, L., & Nathan, P. (2008). *Put Off Procrastinating*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 0 9757995 4 1

Created: August 2008