



Put Off Procrastinating!!

Module 4

Dismissing Procrastination Excuses

Introduction	2
Changing Your Conclusions	2
Challenging Your Conclusions	3
Testing Your Conclusions	5
Encourage Rather Than Criticise	6
Module Summary	8
About the Modules	9

The information provided in this document is for information purposes only. Please refer to the full disclaimer and copyright statement available at <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au> regarding the information on this website before making use of such information.

Introduction

As was already mentioned in Modules 1 and 3, we often create excuses for our procrastination. These excuses justify our behaviour as reasonable, acceptable and OK. If we feel OK about putting things off, it makes sense that we will be more likely to procrastinate on a task or goal. Therefore, we need to deal with the self-talk that goes through our mind and excuses our procrastination, so that we no longer feel it is OK to procrastinate. The other type of self-talk that needs to be dealt with, is when we become highly critical of ourselves for procrastinating. Again, as we have already learned, self-criticism just demotivates us, making us more likely to procrastinate. So in this module you will learn ways to dismiss the destructive self-talk of making excuses and criticising yourself.

Changing Your Conclusions

Remember, our procrastination excuses often revolve around identifying some truth about the situation, and from this concluding we are better off delaying our task or goal to another time. For example:

The Truth	Unhelpful Conclusion
I am really tired	I am better off doing it after I have rested
I don't want to do it now	I may feel more like doing it tomorrow
I will miss out on the fun happening now	I can always wait till nothing much is happening
I don't have everything I need	I will wait till I do
I have plenty of time	So I don't have to start it now
I don't feel inspired	I will wait till I do
I have other things to do	I will do it once those things are finished
I don't have enough time to get it all done	I will wait till I have a lot of time to do it
I work better under pressure	So I will leave it to the last minute

We have labelled these types of conclusions as *unhelpful*, because they ignore that going with the situation or how we feel at the time, may not actually be the best course of action for us in the long run. They also often relate to the unrealistic notion that tomorrow will somehow miraculously be a better time to get productive and follow through with things. Often if we wait for a time when we feel rested, motivated, inspired, have no distractions, have everything we possibly need, have heaps of time, have finished all the other things that we could possibly be doing...we will be waiting till 'the cows come home'. We will be waiting a very long time for just the right conditions to come together to get started on a task or goal. The real truth is that no time is probably ideal for doing something we don't feel like doing, hence now is just as good as any other time to get cracking. Unhelpful conclusions often ignore the fact that if we get started and take a step forward towards completing our task or goal, no matter how small the step, our desire to do that task or goal often increases and we can get some valuable things done. This means that by taking action first, all the other things often fall into place for us and we feel capable of continuing forward and getting the job done.



So, what can we do about these unhelpful conclusions that keep us procrastinating? One way is to **challenge** the unhelpful conclusions, and come up with new more helpful conclusions that we can tell ourself to get us moving, doing, and taking action. The other option is to **test** our unhelpful conclusions and see if they really hold up.

Challenging Your Conclusions



When you challenge your conclusions you take the role of detective, questioning if your conclusions are really valid. Are they based on fact and evidence? Or are your conclusions something you have jumped to, based on not much concrete evidence at all?

The following are the types of questions you can ask yourself to become your own detective and find out if your conclusions really are true, and hence see if your procrastination really is justified. They are called disputation questions because you use them to dispute your procrastination excuses.

Disputation Questions

- What is the factual evidence or reasons that it is better for me to put off this task or goal?
- What is the factual evidence or reasons that it is better for me to start this task or goal now?
- Is it really true that I will be better off in the long run delaying this task or goal?
- Is it really true that I can't make even a small start on the task or goal right now? Can I still get some parts of the task or goal done now, even though conditions aren't ideal?
- Is it really true that later is a better time to do it?
- If I do make some start on the task or goal right now – What might happen? How might I feel?
- If I don't make a start on the task or goal right now – What might happen? How might I feel?

See below for an example of how to use these questions to challenge your procrastination excuses.

Procrastination Excuse	
The Truth <i>I am really tired</i>	Old Unhelpful Conclusion <i>I am better off doing it after I have rested</i>
Answers to Disputation Questions	
<i>It is true I am tired right now and things will be more of an effort.</i>	
<i>But, times before when I have done things even though I am tired, I have felt better for having gotten started and accomplished something, and usually I end up having more energy rather than less.</i>	
<i>If I delay this, it will just play on my mind, I will just feel worse in the long run, and things will be harder to get done.</i>	
<i>I guess I could make a small start, maybe just 30 minutes on it.</i>	
<i>I don't know that I will feel any better after resting, it may be the same story tomorrow.</i>	
<i>If I make a small start I know I will feel better, and may feel like doing more.</i>	
End Result	
The Truth <i>I am really tired</i>	New Helpful Conclusion <i>But I can still make a small start right now and then rest</i>

The next page allows you to practice challenging your common procrastination excuses. Use this to work on the excuses you have been using to put off the task/goal that you have decided to work on throughout these Modules.

Procrastination Excuse	
The Truth	Old Unhelpful Conclusion
Answers to Disputation Questions	
End Result	
The Truth	New Helpful Conclusion

Procrastination Excuse	
The Truth	Old Unhelpful Conclusion
Answers to Disputation Questions	
End Result	
The Truth	New Helpful Conclusion

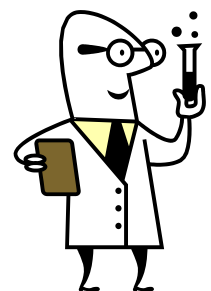
Put Off Procrastinating!!

So at the end of the day we are aiming to find new helpful conclusions that spur us into action, and make us realise that our procrastination isn't justified, that there aren't reasonable excuses for it, and it is better for us to take action now. Below are examples of new helpful conclusions.

The Truth	Helpful Conclusion
I am really tired	But I can still make a small start right now, and then rest
I don't want to do it now	But later won't be any better, so I may as well try to get started
I will miss out on the fun happening now	But if I get some of it done, I can reward myself with other fun later
I don't have everything I need	But I can still try to make a start on some bits of the task
I have plenty of time	But better to get on top of it now than leave it to the last minute
I don't feel inspired	But if I get started, the inspiration may follow, I can't just wait around for inspiration to arrive
I have other things to do	But they are not more important and can be done after this
I don't have enough time to get it all done	But that doesn't mean I can't get some of it done now
I work better under pressure	But it is still worth making a start now, because if I leave things too late it can backfire

Testing Your Conclusions

Another way to change your conclusions is to test them out, like any good scientist would if they had a theory or prediction. Some of your excuses may be open to experimenting with, to see if they really are true or you just think they are true. Here are some examples below, and you may be able to think of others.



Fatigue, Motivation, Inspiration & Mood

"I am really tired, I am better off doing it after I have rested"

"I don't want to do it now, I may feel more like doing it tomorrow"

"I don't feel inspired, I will wait till I do"

"I am not in the mood, I will wait till I am"

Each of these types of excuses rests on the idea that if you don't feel capable of doing it now, due to fatigue, lack of motivation, lack of inspiration or poor mood, it will some how be better at another time in the future, so just wait for that time.

If these excuses apply to you, set yourself an experiment. Next time you find yourself making one of these excuses, rate on a 0-10 scale how fatigued or unmotivated or uninspired or poor your mood is, before doing a task. Then set yourself a small amount of time and do the task (5 minutes, 10 minutes or 30 minutes – whatever seems like a reasonable and realistic starting point for you given how bad you feel). After working on the task for the set amount of time, re-rate how you feel (comparing it to your first rating), and reflect on what you have achieved in the short amount of time you have worked on the task.

Put Off Procrastinating!!

You may then continue with the task for another set amount of time, and again re-rate your feelings after that time.

Another experiment is to time how long it takes for you to naturally feel rested enough, motivated enough, inspired enough and in the mood enough, to do a task. This will help you see if a 'better time' ever does emerge for you, and if so, how long it takes for it to eventuate.

It is important to do these types of experiments a number of times. Remember to test a theory a scientist wouldn't just collect one sample, but a number of samples.

From these experiments, often people find they feel more energised, motivated, inspired or mood lifted once they have commenced a task, and that the notion of a 'better time' in the future never really presents itself or if it does it is usually a long time coming. By doing these experiments, you can see what actually fits for you, rather than presuming it is best to postpone things due to fatigue, motivation, inspiration or mood.

Lack of Resources

"I don't have everything I need, I will wait till I do"

"I don't have enough time to get it all done, I will wait till I have a lot of time to do it"

With these excuses, you demand that you need all the resources required before you can commence a task. So to experiment, alternate between approaching tasks in two different ways. The first way, which we will call the **all or nothing approach**, is to wait till you have everything you need and enough time to complete a task, before you get started. Doing things this way, you wait till you can do the task in one sitting. The second way, which we will call the **bits and pieces approach**, is to do what you can with the resources and time you have available, coming back to the task as more resources and more time becomes available. Doing things this way, you do the task in chunks. Alternate between these two approaches for a variety of tasks, and take note of how each approach makes you feel, how much you get done, and how quickly you get things done. Then compare approaches to see which works best for you. By doing these experiments, you can see what actually fits for you, rather than presuming it is best to postpone things until you have all the resources and time in the world.

Motivational Stress

"I work better under pressure, so I will leave it to the last minute"

With this excuse, you believe that pressure and stress is the key to accomplishing tasks. So to experiment, alternate between approaching tasks in two different ways. The first way, which we will call the **last minute approach**, is to leave tasks until there is little time, you are under pressure to get it done in time and you feel really stressed, and only then commence the task. The second way, which we will call the **ahead of time approach**, is to plan and work on tasks so they are completed well ahead of when they are due (e.g., at least 2 days before). Alternate between these two approaches for a variety of tasks, and take note of how each approach makes you feel, how much you get done, how quickly you get things done, the quality of your work, and whether you meet deadlines. Then compare approaches to see which works best for you. By doing these experiments you can see what actually fits for you, rather than presuming it is best to postpone things until you are stressed.



Encourage Rather Than Criticise

Now that we have dealt with the excuses that lead to procrastination, the other type of self-talk that needs to be addressed to overcome procrastination are your self-criticisms. When you criticise yourself for procrastinating, you just make it harder for yourself to get on top of things. The more you beat yourself down, the harder it is going to be to get back up and start doing.

Put Off Procrastinating!!

Below are some common self-criticisms and the more motivational self-talk that could be used instead. Notice that what is important about the motivational self-talk, is that it separates your behaviour of not getting something done, from who you are as a person and your personal qualities (i.e., the behaviour of not starting a task, does not mean a person possesses the quality of laziness). Also, the motivational self-talk focuses on what can be done from here on in, rather than dwelling on what hasn't been done. You can't change the past, but you can change the now and the future. Finally, the more motivational self-talk gets rid of "I have to", "I should" and "I must", replacing them with things like "I choose", "I would prefer", "I will".

Self-Critical Self-Talk	Motivational Self-Talk
I have to get this done. Suck it up and get going loser!	I choose to work on this task. I know I can get it done if I just focus on one thing at a time.
I should be finished by now. If I can't even do this I must be a real idiot!	I would prefer to be finished by now. But let's focus on what I can do to get closer to the finish line.
I must finish this. Come on stupid...think!	I will finish this. It is just going to take a bit more time. Let's plan how to get it done.
I can't believe I haven't started yet. I must be so lazy!	Just focus on getting started. Just because I haven't started, doesn't mean anything bad about me.
Common on! Others can get it done faster than this – I must be a complete moron!	What others do is of no concern. Focusing on what I am doing and my task is more helpful.

Start taking time to notice your most common self-criticisms and jot them down. That is, tune into that self-talk that puts you down for not having achieved things, particularly for the task/goal you have chosen to work on in these Modules. I know tuning into this can be painful, but you do so with the aim of changing it for the better. For each self-criticism you notice, jot down a more motivational way of talking to yourself. Use the examples above to give you some ideas. Also, if you struggle with thinking of something encouraging to say to yourself, imagine that a friend of yours was using these self-criticisms on themselves, and write down what you would say to them to encourage and motivate them to move forward with a task. We are often good at being motivational and encouraging towards others, but less good at doing it for ourselves. So the aim is to practice talking to and treating ourselves, as we would a friend.

My Self-Critical Self-Talk	My Motivational Self-Talk

Next time you notice yourself using one of your self-criticisms, ask yourself "How is criticising myself helping me get the job done?" and "What is a more motivating way to speak to myself to help me get the job done?" You may then say to yourself the more motivational statements you have come up with, as a way of encouraging yourself to get going and doing. If you criticise yourself a lot, it may be helpful to write down your motivational self-talk on a small card and carry it with you in a wallet or handbag. You won't be use to talking to yourself in an encouraging way, so you may need these prompts and reminders.

Module Summary

- One of the ways to overcome procrastination is to learn how to dismiss the excuses that make our procrastination justified and OK to us.
- Procrastination excuses usually involve some grain of truth, from which we conclude we are better off postponing a task or goal to another time. So, the key to dismissing excuses is to change these unhelpful conclusions.
- One way to change these unhelpful conclusions is to challenge them by asking disputation questions like:
 - What is the factual evidence or reasons that it is better for me to put off this task or goal?
 - What is the factual evidence or reasons that it is better for me to start this task or goal now?
 - Is it really true that I will be better off in the long run delaying this task or goal?
 - Is it really true that I can't make even a small start on the task or goal right now? Can I still get some parts of the task or goal done now, even though conditions aren't ideal?
 - Is it really true that later is a better time to do it?
 - If I do make some start on the task or goal right now – What might happen? How might I feel?
 - If I don't make a start on the task or goal right now – What might happen? How might I feel?
- Another way to change these unhelpful conclusions is to test them. That is, conducting experiments to see if what you predict about your abilities to complete tasks under certain circumstances, really hold up in reality.
- The more you criticise yourself for procrastinating, the more demotivated you feel. As such, turning self-critical self-talk into more motivational self-talk, can also be an important part of overcoming procrastination. The best way to encourage and motivate yourself, is to speak to yourself as you would a friend who was in the same situation.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will learn practical behavioural strategies for overcoming 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