



Put Off Procrastinating!!

Module 5

Practical Techniques To Stop Procrastination

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Introduction

As we have seen already, understanding procrastination and using helpful self-talk to overcome procrastination, are both very important. But, at the end of the day it is taking action that needs to happen. You may be familiar with the phrase “Just Do It”. Ultimately that is what needs to happen to stop your procrastination, but it is easier said than done. No one ever tells you “How To Just Do It”, and this Module will aim to show you how. In practical terms, you need to stop procrastination activities, such as doing pleasurable tasks, lower priority tasks, socialising, engaging in distractions and daydreaming, and instead you need to act and get started on important tasks and goals. This Module will take you through practical ways to stop putting things off and start doing. These practical strategies will help you get going, and will also address any weakness you may have in skills like organisation, time management, managing your environment and the way you approach tasks, which may be contributing to your procrastination.

What Do I Need To Do?

The first practical step to overcoming procrastination is being very clear about what needs to be done. If this is all hazy, then it is going to be very hard to get started. If the task is big or you have many tasks, you won't know where to start. If the task is small, you may be thinking it is worse than it really is. Being clear about what you need to do will bring you one step closer to doing, as you will know exactly what you are up against, and hence have a better idea about how to proceed. Knowing exactly what you need to do involves the following.

Prioritise

Firstly, write a ‘To Do’ list of the tasks and goals you need to work on. This could be a list for the day, the week, the month, or longer, depending on what makes most sense for your circumstances. You may have more than one list, for example a longer-term list for the month and a short-term list for each day. Depending on your situation you may have lots of things on your list, or just one big thing that you have been putting off. When you stand back and look at the list(s), think how realistic it is to achieve these things in the time allocated. If it isn't realistic, see which tasks or goals can be postponed and revisited at a later date.



With your remaining list of activities it is now important to prioritise. Order them from onwards as to what things need to be done first and foremost, then what next, and what can be done later down the track. That way you will know where to start, not based on what you feel like doing, but instead based on what is most urgent and important.

Grade

The next step is to grade each task. What we mean by grade is to break the task into all the small steps that are involved in achieving the task. That way you break the task into ‘chunks’. This works well in the sense that if it is a large task and you don't know where to start, grading the task into its component steps can make it seem less overwhelming. Alternatively if it is a small task, when you go to grade it you may see there isn't much too it, and this may motivate you to get it over and done with. When you grade a task, think of the first step, and then work forward through the series of steps involved until the task is completed. Include all the steps – big, medium and small. For the big steps, see if there is anyway you can break them down further if they seem too big.

Tell Time

People who procrastinate are often not very good at telling time. What we mean by this is that they may underestimate how long something will take them, and hence do not allocate enough time, and so things don't get done or are late. They may also overestimate how long something will take them, and hence make the task a far bigger deal than it really is, which puts them off doing it. Improving your time telling by

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practicing estimating how long something takes can be helpful. You can do this by starting to keep a record of tasks you regularly have problems with because you either underestimate or overestimate the time required to do these tasks. Actually time how long it does take you to do these things and keep a record. Once your time telling has improved, you can then make more accurate estimates of how long each step of each task will take you.

Below is an example of how to prioritise, grade and allocate time to tasks. You can have a go at doing something similar in a notebook, focusing particularly on the tasks or goals you have decided to tackle throughout these Modules.

Prioritise Week's Tasks

- Ring family member
- Finish 'Put Off Procrastinating' Modules
- Pay gas bill
- Tidy spare room for guests
- Start a walking exercise routine

Grade & Time Tasks

Pay gas bill:

1. Find account (5 mins)
2. Ring company & pay over phone (5 mins)

Finish 'Put Off Procrastinating' Modules:

1. Complete Module 5 (2 hours)
2. Write outline for Module 6 (1 hour)
3. Write Module 6 (5 hours)
4. Write outline for Module 7 (1 hour)
5. Write Module 7 (5 hours)
6. Revise Modules 1-7 (7 hours)
7. Format Modules 1-7 (7 hours)

Start a walking exercise routine:

1. Find joggers (5 mins)
2. Get changed (5 mins)
3. Short walks (15 mins)

Tidy spare room for guests:

1. Put things away (20 mins)
2. Rearrange furniture (10 mins)
3. Change spare bed sheets (10 mins)
4. Dust furniture (15 mins)

Ring family member:

1. Find phone number (2 mins)
2. Ring and speak to them (10 mins)

How Can I Do It?

Now that you know exactly what needs to be done, you can focus on the best way to approach each step involved in completing your tasks or goals. The overall aim is to take it one step at a time. However, there are a number of different possibilities for approaching each step of a task or goal, and there is no one right way. Below are some suggestions of different approaches you can try. Some of these approaches will be more suited to certain types of tasks, and less relevant for other types of tasks. Try them on for size and see which you like the most.

Worst-First

One option is to knock out the worst task first. If there is something you are dreading, get it over and done with first, and then all the other things you need to do will seem like a breeze after that. This works particularly well for small, but dreaded tasks (e.g., phoning someone you don't want to speak to).

Using Momentum

Another option is to start doing a task that you like and that energises you, and then without a break quickly switch to a task that you have been putting off. The idea is to use the motivation and momentum you get from the task you like (e.g., cooking), to help you get through the task you don't like (e.g., cleaning the fridge out).

Just 5-Minutes

A really useful approach for getting started on tasks is to plan to spend just 5 minutes on the task. This is such a small amount of time, so you will feel you can tolerate just 5 minutes. At the end of the 5 minutes reassess and see if you can spend just another 5 minutes on the task, and so on. You may decide to make the chunks of time a little larger (i.e., 10 minutes or 15 minutes), if this seems more reasonable for you. The idea being, set just a small amount of time to get started on a task, at the end of which see if you can go just another small amount of time more. You will be surprised at just how much you are able to extend your time working on a task, once you have gotten the ball rolling.



Set Time Limits

A different approach is to set a specific amount of time to work on a task, and stick to just that, rather than extending things even if you feel you can. If you know in the back of your mind that you are going to expect yourself to do more when the time is up, it may stop you from starting in the first place, as it can feel like you are just trying to trick yourself. Whereas, if you know you only need to do 30 minutes and that is it, regardless of whether you feel like doing more, you may be more willing to get going.

Prime Time

Choosing the right time of day to approach a task can be helpful too. You might need to work out what time of day you are most productive or energised or creative. The idea is to attempt tasks when you are at your optimum. You may be a 'night person', a 'morning person' or a 'middle of the day' kind of person. Also, there may be different times of day that are better suited for different types of tasks. For example, all the 'dry' tasks (e.g., household chores) you may be better at tackling in the morning, and 'creative' tasks (e.g., painting or drawing) you may be better with at night. Another example is that you may find it easier to follow through with a new exercise routine in the morning compared to the end of the day, or vice versa. The important thing is to become aware of what time of day works best for you, and seize those moments to get going.

Prime Place

It is also important to choose the right place to attempt a task. You need to be aware of what types of environments you get more done in, and what types of environments have distractions that make you more likely to procrastinate. For example, trying to get a task done while there are lots of people around, means there is the potential for social distractions, which isn't going to help you get going. Therefore, you may

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need to isolate yourself for a set period of time in order to get work done. In addition, attempting tasks whilst there are other distractions within arms reach (e.g., TV, fridge, telephone, etc), is just teasing yourself and tempting procrastination. Hence, seek out environments you can work in with minimal distractions (e.g., the library versus your home, your desk versus the lounge room or your bed, etc).

Remember-Then-Do

For small irritating tasks that often slip your mind, a good strategy is that as soon as you remember you need to do the task, seize that moment to follow through. Rather than putting it off and forgetting about it again, use your remembering of the task as a sign to take action now.

Reminders

If forgetting tasks is a big part of why you procrastinate, use visual reminders and prompts to help you. If the things you need to get done aren't 'in your face', then it will be a case of 'out of sight, out of mind'. So take steps to make sure that the tasks you need to get done are 'in your face'. This could involve writing notes or lists and placing them in prominent places (e.g., fridge, bedside table, bathroom mirror, desk, diary), or using other reminders (e.g., mobile phone, email manager, asking someone else to remind you).



Visualise

Another way to approach your tasks or goals is to first visualise doing them. If you are good with imagery, bring to mind a very vivid and real picture of doing the task. Try to use all your senses to make the image as real as possible. In this image notice any obstacles coming up that get in the way of the task, and visualise yourself successfully overcoming those obstacles and following through with the task to completion. In the image focus particularly on the good feeling you have when the task is complete. Once the task is successfully completed in your mind, use the momentum from the visualisation to get going on the task in real life.

Focus

If you are feeling unsettled when sitting down to commence a task, take a moment to close your eyes and focus on your breath. Try to lengthen out each breath in and each breath out. Slow your breath down to smooth, slow and steady breathing. Take in normal and comfortable volumes of air, and try to allow yourself to breathe from deep in the lungs and belly, rather than shallow in your chest. Just focus on the breath. It may even be helpful to count your breath to yourself (e.g., "breathing in-2-3-4...hold...breathing out 2-3-4-5-6"), counting whatever rhythm feels comfortable to you. Spend 5-10 minutes using your breath to settle and focus, and then return to the task. Anytime you notice yourself becoming unsettled, again just focus on a couple of slow and smooth breaths. Just observe the unsettled feeling, rather than being irritated by it. Let go of the feeling by imagining each exhalation as carrying that unsettledness away from the body, as the breath leaves the body.

Plan Rewards

A really important part of approaching tasks and goals in a productive way is to actually plan rewards and 'play time'. Often the things we could use to reward ourselves (e.g., pleasure, socialising), are the very same things that distract us and get us procrastinating in the first place, and hence make us feel guilty. But, there is a difference between these activities interfering and distracting us from what needs to be done, and instead using them to reward ourselves after something has been achieved or as a well earned break from a task. The more you plan regular rewards for your achievements, the less you will feel like you are missing out or being deprived of something, and hence the less likely it is that you will procrastinate. The key is to let these rewards be guilt-free, by having pre-planned them and fitted them around the work that needs to be done. People will often think "I don't have time" or "I don't deserve rewards or fun". But think of it this way, the things you don't like doing tend to zap some of your energy, whereas rewards, leisure and pleasure help replenish you energy, allowing you to do better quality work in the long run. It is all about a balance between pleasure and achievement. When you are a procrastinator the balance is out, in that there is more pleasure (often guilty pleasure) and little achievement. The aim with overcoming procrastination is not for it to be all about achievement and no



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pleasure, as that doesn't lead to a good life. Instead, finding the balance between pleasure and achievement is the key to being a 'doer', rather than a 'procrastinator'.

Now that you have had a look through the different ways you can approach tasks and goals, jot down the ones you would most like to try that seem relevant to the tasks or goals you are trying to conquer throughout these Modules:

When Can I Do It?

Now that you know what needs to be done, and have some ways of approaching the tasks and goals you need to do, the final practical way to overcome procrastination is to identify when to do it. This involves having some routine, and hence an idea of where the tasks you have been putting off can slot into your routine. It is about making or allocating time to work on tasks or goals. There are two ways you can do this, to schedule or to unschedule your tasks and goals. You may want to try both ways and see which works best for you.

Schedule

Scheduling is like keeping a detailed diary. It involves making a plan for what will be done, at what point in your day or week. On Page 8 you can see an example of how to use a schedule for your week. Notice how this person's existing routine and commitments have been scheduled into the week (e.g., breakfast, work, catching the bus, lunch, dinner, appointments, social outings, etc). Also included is a plan of when to do the steps for each of the tasks and goals they have been procrastinating on, and these tasks appear in **bold type** on the schedule (e.g., find gas bill/ring/pay, change/15min walk, tidy spare room, write Modules, etc). Notice how when you schedule your week, you make a decision about the specific time you are going to do things, this way your week is well planned and you know exactly when you will fit in the things you have been putting off.

Unschedule

The upside of scheduling is that you have a detailed plan in place to follow, and you know exactly what needs to be done when. However, there can be some downsides for some people. One downside is if spontaneous events interfere with the plan. If something interrupts the plan, some people find it hard to be flexible and get back on track with the schedule. Also, some people can feel like their week is too planned and regimented, and may resent this. In addition, if you don't happen to do a task or goal at the set time you planned for whatever reason, some people can feel like they have "failed" at the schedule and may give up altogether. If you find that these problems apply to you when you try scheduling your week, you may want to try using the unschedule (Fiore, 1989). The unschedule shares some similarities with scheduling, in that you use the same format to schedule in any existing commitments or usual routine, that is, the things you know will happen in your week. However, the key difference is that you don't write in when you plan to do the tasks and goals you have set yourself that you had been procrastinating on. Instead, by having scheduled your existing commitments, you will now be able to see where you have space in your week to fit other things. The unschedule will help you see where you have blocks of time to devote to the tasks and goals you have been putting off. Then, when one of these blocks of time presents itself, you can go to your prioritised and graded list of tasks and goals, and decide what you are going to work on during this time. Once you have worked solidly on a task or goal for 30 minutes, mark it into your schedule. Then if you have worked for another solid 30 minutes, mark that in too. That is, you mark in each 30-minute block of time you spend working on your tasks and goals after you have done it. Doing things this way, you

can't fail at the unschedule, as no specific target has been set. In addition, interruptions are more easily accommodated, and you feel like there is some spontaneity in your week. At the end of each day or week you can look back and see how much time you have devoted to doing things you have been procrastinating about, by looking at the blocks of time you have marked off. Page 9 shows an example of what an unschedule might look like.

The main thing is to give scheduling a go, whether it be using a more fixed method (i.e., planning specific tasks for specific times in your week) or unfixed method (e.g., being aware of when you have blocks of time in your routine to devote to tasks and goals, and marking off the time you have worked on these). On Page 10 is a blank schedule so you can experiment with each method for the tasks and goals you have been working on throughout these Modules.

Other Tips

Below are other practical tips that may be helpful in getting you going and following through on tasks.

Self-Monitoring

Similar to marking in the blocks of time you have worked in the unschedule, self-monitoring is the process of recognising and recording what you have achieved. So when you have accomplished some work on a task or completed a task, mark it in on your unschedule, or tick it off on your schedule, or tick it off your initial list of tasks and goals you created. Don't let these things go unnoticed or get swept under the carpet, but instead acknowledge your achievements by having some record of what you have done. It is amazing how something as simple as merely crossing a task off your 'To Do List', can make you feel really good and keep you doing more.

Telling Someone

Another tip is to tell someone you trust that you are aiming to complete certain tasks or goals. Telling someone has three aims. Firstly, when you tell other people it signifies a more serious commitment that you are going to follow through on things, compared to when you do things in secret. Secondly, having another person check in with how you are going can be motivating, as it makes you feel accountable to someone other than yourself. Finally, if you are struggling, then that person can be someone you can gain support from in tough times.

Assertiveness

Another thing to consider is whether a lack of assertiveness is getting in the way of you overcoming your procrastination. For example, if you are unassertive you may find it difficult to say "no". This may mean that you take on unnecessary tasks, which lessens the time you have available for the real priority tasks and goals you need to be working on. Another example is you may find it difficult to make requests of others, such as telling people you need some time alone to work on something important. As such, this may keep any social distractions going that interfere with working on your tasks and goals.

Assertiveness is a skill that takes some time and practice to develop. It involves recognising you have the right to say 'no' and make reasonable requests, in a way that is respectful to both yourself and others. It involves not just what you say (e.g., "I am unable to do that job for you at the moment, is there someone else you could give it to" or "I really need some time alone to work on this right now, but I would love to catch up with you afterwards"), but how you say it (e.g., clear and confident tone of voice, direct but calm style, making eye contact, standing straight, listening to others, etc). If you struggle with these types of things, you may want to refer to the InfoPax on Assertive Communication to help you deal with this issue in more detail.

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	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
6am	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	↓	↓
7am	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	↓	↓
8am	Work	Work	Work	Work	Work	↓	↓
9am	Appointment	Meeting	Paperwork/phone calls	Revise Module 1	Format Module 1	Wake/Breakfast/Shower	Wake/Shower
10am	Appointment	Meeting	Module 7 outline	Revise Module 2	Format Module 2	Yoga Class	Relax
11am	Appointment	Write Module 6	Write Module 7	Revise Module 3	Format Module 3	Ring family member	Get ready
12pm	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	BBQ
1pm	Paperwork	Write Module 6	Write Module 7	Revise Module 4	Format Module 4	Shops	↓
2pm	Complete Module 5	Write Module 6	Write Module 7	Revise Module 5	Format Module 5	Shops	↓
3pm	Complete Module 5	Write Module 6	Write Module 7	Revise Module 6	Format Module 6	House chores	↓
4pm	Module 6 outline	Write Module 6	Write Module 7	Revise Module 7	Format Module 7	House chores	↓
5pm	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Get ready	Read
6pm	Change/15min walk	Find gas bill/ring/ pay	Change/15min walk	Haircut	Change/15min walk	Go out with friends	Read
7pm	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Grocery Shopping	Get ready	↓	Dinner
8pm	TV	Movie	Tidy Spare Room	Dinner	Restaurant	↓	TV
9pm	Read	↓	Read	Read	↓	↓	TV
10pm	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	↓	↓	Sleep
11pm	↓	↓	↓	↓	Sleep	Sleep	↓
12am	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓

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	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
6am	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	Wake/Breakfast	↓	↓
7am	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	Shower/Dress/Bus	↓	↓
8am	Work	Work	Work	Work	Work	↓	↓
9am	Appointment	Meeting	Paperwork/phone calls			Wake/Breakfast/Shower	Wake/Shower
10am	Appointment	Meeting				Yoga Class	Relax
11am	Appointment						Get ready
12pm	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	BBQ
1pm	Paperwork					Shops	↓
2pm						Shops	
3pm						House chores	
4pm						House chores	↓
5pm	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Bus/Home	Get ready	Read
6pm				Haircut		Go out with friends	Read
7pm	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Grocery Shopping	Get ready	↓	Dinner
8pm	TV	Movie		Dinner	Restaurant	↓	TV
9pm	Read	↓	Read	Read	↓	↓	TV
10pm	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	↓	↓	Sleep
11pm	↓	↓	↓	↓	Sleep	Sleep	↓
12am	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓

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	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
6am							
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Module Summary

- Overcoming procrastination in practical ways involves knowing what needs to be done, how to do it and when to do it. Clarity, task approach and time availability is the key.
- To gain clarity as to exactly what needs to be done, you need to write a list of tasks and goals, then prioritise these, then grade each, and then accurately estimate how much time each step of each task or goal will take.
- When contemplating how to do a task, there are numerous ways you can approach any given task to make the task easier. Some of the methods you might try include, worst-first, using momentum, just 5-minutes, set time limits, prime time, prime place, remember-then-do, reminders, visualise, focus, and plan rewards.
- To manage your time availability, so that you know when to do your tasks and goals, you can use a more fixed method like the schedule (i.e., planning specific tasks for specific times in your week) or a more unfixed method like the unschedule (e.g., being aware of when you have blocks of time in your routine to devote to tasks and goals, and marking off the time you have worked on these).
- Other things to consider when overcoming procrastination is self-monitoring your achievements, getting someone else involved in the process, and improving your assertiveness skills.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will find tips for addressing some of the underlying reasons for your procrastination, such as dealing with your unhelpful rules and assumptions and increasing your ability to tolerate discomfort.

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.

REFERENCES

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

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