

The Perils of Procrastination

(and what you can do about it)

By Rob McKelvey

An anonymous quote states: *“Procrastination is the grave in which opportunity is buried”* Pretty sobering words. It’s like not opening the door when opportunity knocks. But is procrastination all that bad. Ellen DeGeneres is quoted as saying: *“Procrastination isn’t the problem, it’s the solution. So procrastinate now, don’t put it off.”*

So is it good or bad. The answer is: “It depends.” Procrastination can serve us well and may not be a peril. It’s only when it goes on too long or beyond a time for action in order to avoid something that it is a peril. One needs to look at the reason for procrastination. What stops someone from doing things or making good decisions!

In my mind there are three reasons people procrastinate.

1. They need more information to act upon.
2. They are aroused by the pressure of a deadline.
3. They are afraid of failure...or indeed, success.

Now the first reason is a very sound reason to procrastinate. After all, we want to make decisions and take actions when we have enough information upon which to decide what to do. And often we don’t, or part of us knows we don’t have that information. It is only common sense to make a decision based on the facts rather than on a quick emotion. The pitfall here is that we may continue to gather more and more information...paralysis by analysis. It is important then to determine what, and how much, information is needed to make the decision rather than getting caught in that cycle.

Reason two of being aroused or excited by the pressure of a deadline and leaving it to the last minute to enhance that pressure is an interesting one. The task gets done, but is the pressure really good for you. It may be useful to inspect what it is within you that needs to do this. And is it possible that you are putting others under undo pressure. If you are one of these people it may be useful to ask yourself if a more balanced approach would be better.

The last reason for procrastination, the fear of failure, or success, is the one that I really want to focus on. Some of the fears that stop people from doing things are common at times to everyone. While this list is not all inclusive, it touches on the most common “fears” that inhibit people from doing things. These are:

- Fear of failure
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of success (yes some people fear success)

- Fear of appearing silly, stupid
- Fear of being vulnerable
- Fear of being less, or better, than someone else
- Fear of getting it wrong

Do you notice anything in common with these fears? (Aside from the fact that you may, at times, experience them). They are all internal and relate to your own state of mind. They are not the external situations, rather, how you relate to what happens internally and then act from that place..

So, if you procrastinate in doing something then the fear won't materialise. Right? Possibly. But you still have the fear inside you. I'm afraid that the only way to get rid of the fear of doing something is to go out and do it... whatever the "it" happens to be. And don't be distracted. Quite often when there are uncomfortable, or even boring, things to do we can find other things to do to distract us from the task at hand. Procrastination can be really easy. Especially in this age of technology with email, facebook, instant messenger, etc just begging you to answer them rather than work on an assignment or report.

I remember the first time that I had to give a presentation to a management board. I was scared to death. I kept postponing the inevitable with a myriad of excuses. The fact was that I was afraid that I would make a mistake in the presentation... get a fact or figure wrong, not have an answer to a question, etc. As a result the management board would think I was an idiot. Needless to say the presentation had to go ahead and I had to do it. All my procrastination did was delay it and create more stress and fearful imaginings on my part. (the imagination is a very fertile field when it comes to fearful happenings) To make a long story short I did the presentation; they liked it; and I was on my way to getting rid of the fear that held me back from giving presentations. I actually now like to give them.

The point being, I worked through the fear. I still had it but I controlled it rather than it controlling me. I went from being "helpless" and controlled by the fear to being able to handle the situation. Once you accept the fact that you can handle what comes your way, fear will have no place to grow. An imagined fear, or the consequences of the imagined fear, are nearly always worse than the actual.

Here are 7 steps to help you put an end to procrastination.

1. Make a list of things you want, or need, to get done. The list should not be pages long or it may be too daunting. Make it 3 to 8 items. Start small with the intention of completing them.
2. Prioritise the list. Use whatever system, numeric, alpha, whatever to help you prioritise from urgent to least urgent.
3. Set a deadline or timeframe for the completion.

4. Build a plan. Allocate time to work on each task. It could be as little as 5 minutes or as much as 5 hours. You make the determination but make it realistic. If you are a morning person choose the morning and if you are a night owl choose later in the day or night.
5. Focus on the task at hand for the allocated time. Get rid of things that may distract you. Turn off the phone or PC if necessary. Let those that need to know, know that you do not want to be interrupted.
6. Reward yourself. When you have completed one, or several, of the items give yourself a reward. Whether it is a movie, walk on the beach, a cup of tea, piece of chocolate, glass of wine... whatever. You deserve to congratulate yourself on a job well done.
7. Do something. The best way to work through fear is to take action in the direction you wish to head. Any action, no matter how small, is enough to break the cycle.

And don't procrastinate, do it now.