



Procrastination

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It seems like all of us, to one extent or another, struggle with procrastination. I think it is one of the main challenges with which my clients struggle. Sometimes I think it is an epidemic in our society. So, what causes this problem? More importantly, how does one overcome it?

First, I think it is important to understand that procrastination usually goes hand in hand with perfectionism. Most of my clients who struggle with procrastination tell me that their thinking is something like this, "I don't want to start anything unless I know I can do it perfectly. I always hesitate to start because I am afraid I will put out my best effort and someone will find it wanting. So, I play games with myself and delay the start of my project until the last minute. Once I know I cannot delay any further I begin. At this point I know it will not be my best work because I do not have enough time to do it well. Therefore if someone is disappointed in me it won't bother me because I know it wasn't my best effort." The sad thing is that each of the people who tell me this story is totally frustrated with this pattern, admit it is tearing away at their self-image, but feel powerless to break free from the pattern.

The first question I want to answer is what causes this problem? The answer is consistently that people are stuck in the thinking that they will be judged on the quality of their efforts by others. Furthermore, getting the approval of others is very important. When we procrastinate we generally are stuck in the belief that we have to produce perfect work to be considered acceptable. Quite frankly, this thinking was usually put there by our parents. Somehow the child in us developed the idea that the only way we would be guaranteed acceptance and love by our parents was by producing excellent, if not perfect, results. If this is the case, better to do nothing than to do something poorly.

Understanding this thought pattern leads us to the first step in overcoming procrastination. The answer is simple. It's just terribly difficult. We have to change our thinking of judging ourselves by our results to judging ourselves by our efforts. It is also imperative to seek our own approval over that of others.

What I usually recommend to my clients is to put a sign in a prominent position in their home, like on their bathroom mirror, that states something like, "I will give my best effort today, and that will be good enough." Then I have them begin a daily journal to take note of the thoughts that are causing them to procrastinate. They then engage these voices in a dialogue, which counters these dysfunctional arguments and replaces them with functional ones. At that point, they are instructed to make some small change in how they would normally attack a problem. If they have a messy office, for instance, I suggest that they set a goal of cleaning off their desk. Not the whole room! When they accomplish this they are instructed to tell themselves that they did their best and that is good enough. Then they go and do something to reward their functional behavior. What this does is literally reprogram their brains. The neurons that are reciting dysfunctional messages slowly wither from disuse and are replaced by functional ones that break down the walls of procrastination.

Please understand that this process can be painfully slow, but your success is inevitable if you stick to it. It's like pumping water out of a well with a hand pump. At first it seems like you are doing all kinds of work and no results are coming. But once the water starts coming out it just takes a little steady pressure to keep it flowing. Once you start overcoming your procrastination your productivity along with the quality of your results increases. This causes a commensurate increase in your self-esteem and confidence. The process is self-reinforcing. All it takes to get started is a little c-c-courage and hard work.