

Information Sheet

Dealing with Procrastination

Procrastination is a common human behaviour that most people undertake at some point in their lives. It involves delaying a task that needs to be done, instead choosing to engage in another behaviour or task despite negative consequences associated with not completing the original task. Unfortunately, almost any task can be a source of procrastination, and it can occur in all areas of life (e.g., academic, work, household, financial and social). Numerous activities may be used as a diversion from completing a required task, including television, socialising, sleeping, social media, internet use, gaming and even lower priority tasks such as tidying or cleaning.

Engaging in procrastination activities often improves mood or reduces anxiety in the short term by providing relief from the discomfort associated with a task. However, the negative consequences of procrastinating tend to worsen mood in the long term. The avoidance of a task will often be associated with feelings of guilt or shame, or anxiety as deadlines approach, which may in turn increase negative feelings towards the task and lead to further procrastination! Fortunately, procrastination can be addressed by implementing a range of techniques:

Dismiss your excuses. Be aware that the excuses we use when procrastinating help justify the behaviour, so to break the cycle of procrastination these unhelpful thoughts must be noticed, acknowledged and dismissed.

Common procrastination excuses include:

- "I have plenty of time so I don't have to start yet"
- "I'm not in the right mood/not feeling motivated"
- "I'll miss out on doing something more fun"
- "I don't know how to start"
- "There are other things to be done"
- "I don't have time to do much now - so I'll wait"

To help dismiss your procrastination excuses, *notice* the excuses, *realise* they are simply thoughts, *accept* that optimal conditions rarely arise and *acknowledge* that it's

best to just start and work step-by-step on the task until it's finished.

Determine what needs to be done by creating to-do lists (daily, weekly, monthly). Each task should be prioritised from most to least important. Tasks should also be broken down into smaller achievable steps, and estimates made on the time necessary to complete each step. This process gives a visual representation of what needs to be done, and breaking down the tasks shows that completion is attainable.

Make the task seem easier by determining how each task should be done. Many different approaches can be adopted here, such as:

- a. *Do the worst task first:* see to the worst task first and later tasks will seem comparably easier
- b. *5 minutes:* plan to spend a focused 5 minutes on the task; reassess after 5 minutes and see if you can complete another 5 minutes; repeat
- c. *Time limit:* every time you approach a task set a time limit for yourself to work on it (e.g., 30 min)
- d. *Focus:* to hone your attention, start by closing your eyes and focusing on your breath for 5 mins.
- e. *Rewards:* most importantly, when a step or a task is completed reward yourself for the hard work!

Utilise time appropriately by creating a timetable where all existing commitments and routines are scheduled – including rest time! You can also create a timeline by working backwards from when a task needs completion, and scheduling each step to ensure there is enough time to finish it.

In some instances, procrastination becomes such a problem that it begins to seriously impact functioning in various areas of life. If this is the case, working with a professional may help to break this harmful cycle of procrastination.