

August 5, 2009

Procrastination: later is not always better

By CBC News
CBC News

Procrastination is part of the human condition, but it can also cause more stress.

If you are thinking about reading this article later, you're not alone.

Like many people, you probably have at one time or another put off until later what could be done today. Whether it's avoiding a medical appointment, not writing an essay, or stalling on a bill payment, procrastination is nothing new and no big surprise.

What is surprising, however, is why procrastination happens time and again. Why don't some people learn that short-term gain is almost always followed by long-term pain? After all, those deadlines usually land with a heart-sickening thud.

The answer is simple: procrastination is part of the human condition, York University professor Gordon Flett tells CBC News.

"It's natural for people when a task is particularly aversive to want to put it off," he said.

So we dodge, delay or defer when the task at hand is either too difficult, too unclear, or just too boring, said Flett, who helped organize a conference at York on Aug. 4 and 5 dealing with procrastination and academia.

"It's certainly the case that a majority of people admit that they are procrastinators ? at least some of the time," agreed Sanford DeVoe, a professor of organizational behaviour at the Rotman School of Management in Toronto.

People put things off not because they are lazy or incompetent, Flett said. Often, they stall because they are expecting the worst.

"Usually these are people who can demonstrate action and behaviour when called upon ? when they absolutely have to," he said.

Dread leads to delay

"They put things off because they dread doing them," he said.

"In the worst-case scenarios, procrastination could become a matter of life and death," Flett said. For example, whether it's avoiding the doctor or the dentist, or not putting on sunscreen, people's health can suffer.

"They put themselves at risk," he said.

What about those who say that procrastination actually works for them? After all, some say they do their best work under the gun.

Flett doesn't buy it. "There is not a lot of evidence to support that line of thinking, he said.

"It's a very stressful way to be," he said, "and we know that stress can have a damaging effect on one's body in a variety of ways," he said.

"People think that deadlines help creativity, but they don't," DeVoe agreed. Avoiding that deadline crunch is the better way to go, he said.

"When you are not constrained, the work you are going to do is going to be enhanced. You are able to really focus on the end goal and have a larger sense of the project at hand," he said.

Best way: evenly spaced deadlines

"In general, procrastinators perform worse. They actually perform better when there are evenly spaced deadlines offered up to them."

DeVoe pointed to research relating to university term papers and deadlines. When students put off writing a paper "initially, they feel really good, they feel healthier than their non-procrastinating counterparts," DeVoe said.

"But as their deadline approaches, they get much more stressed out" than the non-procrastinators, he said.

As well, when some people procrastinate, it's not because they don't care but because they care too much, Flett said.

"I've seen many students over the years who have been crippled by this combination where they want to have things just absolutely right," he said.

"They beat themselves up a lot along the way by saying things like 'It has to be just right, but why am I not getting it to that point? Other people must be getting there ahead of me.'"

And wasting time can have dire consequences in the workplace, Flett said, especially when it comes to internet addiction and what he calls cyberslacking.

Three pointers

"There are cases of people who have lost their jobs because they use the internet as [a] form of distraction, as part of their procrastination," he said.

So, what can you do to combat procrastination? Carleton University professor Timothy Pychyl, who specializes in the study of procrastination, offers three tips:

1. Just get started. "Don't waste more time planning and thinking about the task," he says on his website. "Usually, that's just another way to avoid the task," he writes on his website blog. Often, once you get started on a task, it can be better than you expected.
2. Keep focused on your goal ? don't give up. "You should not try to make yourself feel better. You should get to work," Pychyl writes.
3. Be honest with yourself. Do not engage in self-deception.

And, if you find it hard to resist checking emails or surfing the web, DeVoe suggests trying to set limits at the start of each day.

"You want to say at the start of the day, 'I need to spend X amount of time focusing on this project,'" he said. "Once you are in the heat of the moment, that temptation can be too strong. Make those decisions ahead of time."



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