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Seal your fate - don't procrastinate

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It's a human tendency to put some things off - doing taxes, getting a colonoscopy, cleaning the garage, getting out of bed on Friday the 13th. It spans cultures - the Bhagavad-Gita and Benjamin Franklin both touch on it.

And it seems to be getting worse, with more than 25 percent of adults reporting problems with procrastination, up from 15 to 20 percent just a few years ago, a rise many experts blame on the availability of distractions such as Twitter, Facebook, smart phone apps and other technologies.

Nor is the recession making it easier for procrastinators.

"I think the economy has people terrified," says Jane Burka of Oakland, who with Leonora Yuen of Palo Alto wrote "Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It Now."

"There is so much anxiety, and that plays into why people procrastinate," she says.

Economic anxiety can even "immobilize people," Burka says. Or it can drag people into giving up before they start a project: "They want new jobs but they assume there are no jobs so they don't even try."

Experts agree that one proven way to overcome procrastination is to break those great big projects into small manageable steps. That's where professional naggers like Rachel Cornell of Orlando, come in.

For \$75 a month, she calls clients every weekday morning to discuss the e-mail they've sent her the night before with their small-step plans for the coming day and brags about what they have accomplished.

"It sounds kind of silly but it's two things," Cornell says. "It's accountability and knowing somebody wants you to do it."

While some of Cornell's clients find her, others are referred by coaches, therapists and career counselors.

"I'm not a coach, I'm not an organizer, I'm nonjudgmental and I help people get things done," she says. "Now, I'm working with more people who've been laid off" and who need a push, a nudge, indeed a nag, to retool their resume or make networking calls.

She also offers intensive weeklong or all-day nagging for people procrastinating on critical

endeavors "that mean your butt or your job if they don't get done," according to her Web site, www.pronagger.com. "What I do is different than just calling a friend," she says. "It's a different interaction. Paying for it does make a difference."

If you think Cornell's service is born of having more money than sense consider this: Procrastination has reached such a level that there's even awareness-raising National Procrastination Week, which was - ahem - last week. What makes it different from something like National Cherry Month, which is February, are the numbers:

Procrastination costs the United States \$50 billion annually in lost productivity, which is probably "an underestimate," says Piers Steel, an associate professor at the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary who calculated the loss for 2002. He defines procrastination as "to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse-off for the delay."

A growing issue

His research, published in the journal *Psychological Bulletin* in 2007, suggests the problem is growing among adults. He also calculated that the average American who put off doing taxes until the last minute in 2002 paid \$400 extra because of mistakes made while trying to meet the April 15 deadline.

Americans, however, aren't exceptional procrastinators. People everywhere put off things like making lifestyle changes such as losing weight or stopping smoking, saving for retirement - just about everything important and not fun.

The good news is, if you're a procrastinator, you can change, says Burka. She and Yuen should know. They based their book in part on their workshops for UC Berkeley students, and turned it in two years past deadline. In 2008, the book's 25th year in print, they published an updated version - it was only six weeks late - to address changes that make it "possible to procrastinate 24/7!" as they say on their Web site.

To stop procrastinating we need to understand why we do it. For those few who never face the problem, it's difficult to understand why people fail to take action to avoid bigger problems, according to Burka and Yuen.

The myth is that procrastinators are lazy or have poor time management skills.

But many reasons, oftentimes interwoven, block that "just do it" mantra. For some people, procrastination may serve a purpose, bolstering a wobbly sense of self-esteem. If you procrastinate, point out Burka and Yuen, "you never produce your best and therefore, it is never put to the test. Your ability to handle greater success remains unknown and you can feel powerful, autonomous or righteously angry, indirectly through avoidance."

Burka and Yuen point out that there may be biological roots to procrastination. People with ADD "are likely to procrastinate because they're easily distracted and need constant stimulation," or people with executive dysfunction "are likely to procrastinate because it is difficult to organize, prioritize, concentrate and follow through." As for those people who are depressed "it may be hard for you to get yourself going on much of anything."

The psychological aspects

Then there are complex psychological reasons. "Taxes, for some people it's just a task," says Yuen. "For other people, it's something else. They think 'I'm really stupid' or 'I don't understand money.'" This year, for many people, doing their taxes means confronting how much money they've lost, which means many people will put it off because they just don't want to know, Yuen says.

One thing rings true, however: Yielding to temptation usually results in immediate pleasure of some sort. "There's a short-term payoff but there's long-term pain," Burka says. "Short-term pleasure interferes with long-term planning."

Washington, D.C., goal achievement expert Caroline Adams Miller, author of "Your Best Life" (Sterling, 2008), agrees with Burka, Yuen and others who see the Internet as the ultimate temptation for many people.

"Some of these advances are very positive but you have to control the technology. I have a lot of people who do very successful job hunting on Facebook or LinkedIn, but not if they're spending hours fussing with their profile and resume each day," she said.

Yuen says part of this can be explained by how the brain works. As we watch television, for example, we're bombarded by crawlers, blinking logos and pop-ups for upcoming programs. The brain takes seven seconds to disengage from one and to engage in the next, she says. A result of this speed shifting of attention is "over time, you're building neural pathways that make it harder for you to focus, even when you have the opportunity," she says. "It's like culturally induced ADD."

For most people "the challenge is to set limits," says Yuen. "The Internet is so seductive. It makes it feel as if you're doing something important. ... It's like a drug. The important thing is to get the dose right."

Establish some goals

Burka suggests setting short-term goals. Procrastinators "tend to think in vague and global terms of what they want to achieve," she says, and rebel at the notion of short-term goals, saying, "That won't do me any good."

Burka says that attitude works against them: "If you only look at the mountain instead of the steps

on the path in front of you, you'll get tired, but if you put your head down and go one step at a time you'll climb the mountain."

To take a test to measure your proclivity to procrastinate, go to www.procrastinus.com.

Try these guidelines to put an end to procrastination. **E6**

Tools to reclaim your time and goals

- 1.** Start with a clear-cut list of what you want to accomplish short term and long term in your own life. A comprehensive survey across numerous cultures showed that the happiest people wake up every day to clear-cut life goals. Clear-cut goals allow the brain to focus on immediate steps and help prevent anxiety and depression from flourishing.
- 2.** Eliminate people from your social network who are procrastinators and slackers. The newest research on social contagion theory from Harvard Medical School shows that people do things in clusters, such as quitting smoking and becoming obese. "Birds of a feather flock together" is true for goal accomplishment, as well.
- 3.** Prime your environment for goal accomplishment. People who see words and pictures that spur them on to feel good about themselves and their goals behave more proactively than people who read stories, listen to music or see pictures of people or situations that make them depressed, or that remind them of failures in their lives.
- 4.** Install an application like RescueTime, www.rescuetime.com, a free time-management tool, on your computer so that you can print out a log of where your time went that week. This will help you figure out how many hours you spent being productive and how many you spent on Facebook, Twitter or other sites that don't generate productive results.
- 5.** Create accountability for yourself around results. Tell significant people what your goals are and when you expect to accomplish them. The more people who know about your goals, the more likely you are to accomplish them.
- 6.** Remove all games, instant message programs and other distractions from your computer or cell phone so that you are not tempted to use them to distract yourself from getting work done. Use them as a reward, if anything.
- 7.** Know your own procrastination sequence, and then break it. We all procrastinate by using specific behaviors and thoughts to take us off course, and once we know what those steps are, we are in a position to change them.
- 8.** Have a "mastery" experience first thing in the morning so that you start the day with a "win"

around self-regulation. This could mean doing your exercises or having a productive routine around making beds and sweeping a floor before the day is under way. Having a "win" first thing in the day has the domino effect of making you behave more proactively throughout the rest of the day.

9. Become a little bit happier. People who move their moods from negative to positive, or neutral to positive, by stimulating laughter or being generous, have been found to restore depleted willpower energy. Sometimes a quick look at a funny YouTube video, or calling a humorous friend, can make all the difference in getting something done.

10. Reward yourself for a completed job. People who reward positive actions are more likely to repeat those actions in the future. Rewards also allow us to savor something that makes us happy, which prolongs well-being and promotes further proactive behavior.

From "Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide" (Sterling, 2009) by Caroline Adams Miller and Dr. Michael B. Frisch.

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