Stop Putting It Off

What the Research Says About Procrastination, Perfectionism and Worry

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2026 Edition | Free chapters 1 to 3

Chapter 1: What Predicts Procrastination

Almost everyone has put something off. Researchers ask what makes some people, and some tasks, so much more likely to be delayed. One large analysis gathered the answers.

WHAT THE REVIEW DID

The author reviewed the conceptual, theoretical and empirical work on procrastination, which the paper describes as a prevalent and harmful form of self-regulatory failure that is not entirely understood. The author then ran a meta-analysis of possible causes and effects based on 691 correlations (Steel, 2007, Psychological Bulletin).

WHAT THE REVIEW FOUND

Neuroticism, rebelliousness and sensation seeking showed only a weak connection with procrastination. The strong and consistent predictors were task aversiveness (how unpleasant the task is), task delay (how far off the reward or deadline is), self-efficacy (belief in your ability), impulsiveness, and conscientiousness together with its parts: self-control, distractibility, organisation and achievement motivation. The author says these effects fit temporal motivation theory, which combines expectancy theory with hyperbolic discounting, the tendency to value near rewards much more than distant ones. The author adds that research should not be delayed, because the prevalence of procrastination appears to be growing.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Three ideas can be used straight away. Tasks that are unpleasant get put off more. Tasks whose payoff is far away get put off more. And low belief in your ability and high impulsiveness go with more delay. That points to practical levers: make the task less unpleasant, bring the reward closer, build confidence, and cut distractions.

LIMITS

The abstract gives no sample size for the whole analysis and no figure for the strength of each predictor, only that some were strong and some weak. The analysis is from 2007. Correlations are links and not proof that changing one factor

will change the delay. This book is general education and not treatment for any condition.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the review.

Make the first step small. Set a five-minute start.

Bring the reward closer. Plan something pleasant straight after the task.

Cut distractions. Phone away, one tab open.

Build confidence by finishing something tiny today.

Note what makes the task aversive. Boring, unclear, frightening? Name it.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A man keeps putting off his tax paperwork. He names what is aversive: he does not know where to start. He writes a three-line first step, puts his phone in another room, and sets a timer for ten minutes with a coffee waiting afterwards. It is one person's plan, and not a test.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Pick one task you have been avoiding. Write why it is aversive, and one five-minute first step. Do it today.

KEY POINTS

A meta-analysis of 691 correlations found task aversiveness, task delay, low self-efficacy, impulsiveness and low conscientiousness strongly predicted procrastination, while neuroticism, rebelliousness and sensation seeking were weakly linked. The findings fit temporal motivation theory.

Chapter 2: Procrastination and Student Results

Does putting off study cost students marks? A study of a university course tested it with online course data.

WHAT THE STUDY DID

The author notes that academic procrastination is common and has many negative outcomes. Many studies looked at its causes and correlates, but few at interventions. This study was an initial effort to look at how studying procrastination relates to online course participation and to results, as a basis for building an intervention (Goroshit, 2018, Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community).

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

Studying procrastination was negatively associated with the final exam grade and with all three measures of online course participation. The final exam grade was positively associated with two of the participation measures, and the participation measures were correlated with each other. Studying procrastination together with the participation measures explained about 50 percent of the variation in the final exam grade. How often students used the course website had the strongest positive effect on the final grade. The author concludes that studying procrastination gets in the way of students' results and that academic interventions are needed.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Students who put off studying took part less in the online course and did worse on the exam. Frequent use of the course site was the strongest single sign of a better grade. That suggests a simple lever: regular, small contact with the material.

LIMITS

The abstract does not give the number of students or the strength of each link. The findings are correlations from one course. The study does not show that procrastination caused the lower grades, since students with less time or interest may both delay and do worse. The author calls it an initial basis for an intervention and did not test one.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the study.

Touch the material every day. Even ten minutes counts.

Log in early in the week, not only before the deadline.

Use the course tools. Quizzes, forums and notes.

Set a regular study slot, at the same time each day.

Track your contacts. Tick off each day you opened the material.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A student who usually studies only the night before an exam decides to open the course page for ten minutes after dinner each day and to answer one practice question. After three weeks he has opened it eighteen times. It is his own record, not a result from the study.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

For one week, tick a box each day you spend at least ten minutes on the thing you tend to put off.

KEY POINTS

In an online course, studying procrastination went with lower participation and a lower final grade, and together they explained about half the variation in the final grade. Frequent use of the course site had the strongest positive effect. The links are correlations.

Chapter 3: Does Treatment Help?

If procrastination causes trouble, can a psychological treatment reduce it? A systematic review pooled the trials.

WHY THE REVIEW WAS DONE

The authors say procrastination can be stressful and frustrating but seldom causes major distress, though for some people it becomes problematic, bringing anxiety, low mood, physical complaints and lower wellbeing. Few studies had looked at the benefits of treating it, and nobody had pooled the results (Rozental, Bennett, Forsstrom, Ebert, Shafran, Andersson and Carlbring, 2018, Frontiers in Psychology).

WHAT THEY DID

They searched for randomised controlled trials that compared psychological treatments for procrastination with an inactive comparison group and measured the outcome by self-report. The review was pre-registered. From 1,639 records, 12 studies (21 comparisons, 718 participants) went into the analysis.

WHAT THEY FOUND

Comparing treatment with control, the overall effect size was g = 0.34 (95 percent confidence interval 0.11 to 0.56), with significant differences between studies. For the three of four studies that used cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), the effect size was g = 0.55 (interval 0.32 to 0.77), with no remaining differences between studies, in 236 participants. The test for publication bias was not significant, and the authors rate some risk of bias in the studies. The authors conclude that psychological treatments seem to have small benefits on procrastination, with large variation, and that CBT was associated with a moderate benefit but rested on only three studies.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM THIS

Treatment helped, but the average effect was small to moderate, and the studies varied. CBT looked better, but the number of studies behind that is small, so the figure of 0.55 should be held loosely.

LIMITS

The outcomes were self-reported, and the comparison groups were inactive, such as a waiting list. The interval for the overall effect is wide, from 0.11 to 0.56. The abstract notes the measures differed too much to combine for other outcomes. This book is not a treatment, and for severe or distressing procrastination a qualified professional can help.

HABITS TO TRY

These are practical suggestions, not findings from the review.

Look for a structured approach. Cognitive behavioural methods set goals, test thoughts and plan steps.

Write the thought that stops you. "I have to do it perfectly or not at all." Then write a kinder version.

Plan the step and the time. When, where, how long.

Track your delay. Note how long you put it off and what you did instead.

Get help if it is distressing. A doctor or counsellor can advise.

A WORKED EXAMPLE (INVENTED FOR PRACTICE)

A woman puts off a difficult email. She writes the thought "if it is not perfect, they will think I am useless", then replaces it with "a clear, honest email is good enough". She sets ten minutes to write it and sends it. It is a single example of a method, and not a trial.

PRACTICE EXERCISE

Write the thought behind one thing you are putting off. Write a more balanced version, and one step you can do in ten minutes.

KEY POINTS

A review of 12 randomised studies (718 people) found psychological treatments had a small effect on procrastination (g = 0.34, interval 0.11 to 0.56), with wide variation; CBT in three studies (236 people) had a moderate effect (g = 0.55). Outcomes were self-reported.

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