Putting A Stop To Putting It Off
How to Overcome Procrastination

"I know I should do it, but I just can't seem to get started."

"I have a week to finish this project, I don’t need to start it now."

"Just one more video game - then I’ll get going."

Sound familiar? Almost all of us procrastinate at some point. We all have our list of things we try to avoid doing, whether it be studying for an exam, starting a work project, cleaning our house, etc. Putting off doing tasks we do not like is normal, but if procrastination gets out of hand, we end up wasting valuable time and energy.

A 2007 meta-analysis by University of Calgary psychologist Piers Steel, PhD, reports that 80 percent to 95 percent of university students procrastinate, particularly when it comes to doing their coursework (Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 133, No. 1).

What is Procrastination?

Procrastination is the avoidance of doing a task that needs to be accomplished. Often times procrastination can lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, depression and self-doubt. Procrastination has a high potential for painful consequences. It can interfere with our academic, professional and personal success.

Why do we Procrastinate?

People who procrastinate often are accused of being lazy, but it is usually not so simple. Here are some of the more common causes of procrastination and steps you can take to overcome these causes:

Being overwhelmed by the size of a project. Try to assess realistically how long it takes to complete assignments/chores. Break down large projects into smaller, more manageable tasks, assigning a separate “due date” to each task. Post your deadlines on a calendar in a prominent location.

Fear of the unknown. Do you feel unprepared or incapable of completing new tasks? Do you feel the expectations are ambiguous? If so, you may want to seek guidance, support or a new perspective from someone familiar with the task. If it is a class assignment or exam material, meet with you instructor or a peer tutor for clarification. Once we take a small step towards clarifying the task our feelings of uneasiness will typically decrease. Remind yourself you tend to feel uneasy when trying a new skill but you have learned new tasks and information in the past.

Being overextended. It is important to assess your obligations to check if it is humanly possible to complete them. In our fast pace society, we are often required to take on
more responsibilities than what we can handle. These tasks may include, class and or work attendance, homework, a job, children, numerous clubs or organizations and a social life. If you feel like you have overextended yourself with time commitments, you may need to omit, delegate or reschedule some of these obligations. This can be done by writing down all of your obligations and prioritizing them based on your personal values. Items that fall lower on your list of prioritization may need to be delayed, rescheduled, delegated or removed from your schedule.

**Poor time management.** Prioritize your work and chores so that the most important things get done first. Try to resist the temptation to distract yourself with a trivial task instead of beginning the real work. Even a modest amount of work on one of your priority items can bring a sense of accomplishment.

**Surrounding yourself with distractions.** Beginning an unpleasant task is hard enough especially when we give ourselves easy excuses to procrastinate. There are many distractions at home that may prevent us from completing our tasks. These distractions can include television, video games, a computer, pets and more. Arrange your work space exactly the way you like it and work at times when you are most energetic. Set up the environment with as few distractions as possible, which may mean studying in a space where you do not have easy access to a television, computer or video games.

**Lack of "down" time.** With an increased demand on our time, we often feel guilty if we try to take some legitimate relaxation time. This may cause us to procrastinate on some projects. When we don’t schedule in legitimate relaxation time, we end up "stealing" bits of time from our study, work or home time. Incentive to work increases when there is the prospect of a good reward at the end. Scheduling regular breaks and recreation helps keep a busy life balanced and the mind refreshed.

**Perfectionist expectations of oneself.** Try to set reachable sub-goals that are specific in your studying or work. Reachable goals may include completing 2 pages of a written report that is due at the end of the week or reading 20 pages within a certain time frame. This helps you gain a sense of accomplishment from having reached your goal. Remember it often feels worse to not do a task at all instead of doing it in a less than perfect manner. Taking the first active step to begin the project will increase your motivation and confidence in your ability to complete the job competently.

**Following someone else's goals instead of your own.** People rarely are inspired to work diligently for a cause that has little meaning for them. Examine your choices and motives, particularly if you feel that you "have to" do something. Explore how you can approach the task or assignment in a way that will be more meaningful to you.

**Need Additional Help?**

Do you feel like your procrastination is starting to have an impact on your academic performance? Would you like individual assistance in overcoming procrastination? The University Counselor, Becky Lawyer, M.A., LPC is available to meet with students on
issues such as procrastination, anxiety, depression and other personal issues that may be impacting you during your education at Northwestern Health Sciences University. Students can make an appointment with the University Counselor by calling 952-885-5458.