

HACK YOUR BRAIN TO PRODUCTIVITY

**Exploiting Psychological Principles
to Get Things Done**

MIT Splash 2021 Class S14757
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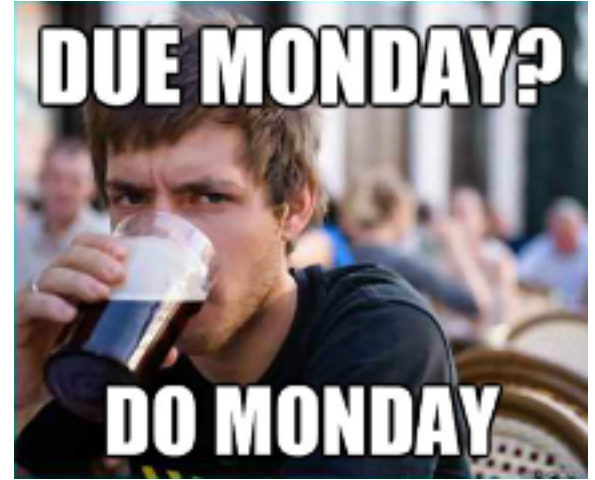
WELCOME, PROCRASTINATORS!!

What is your procrastination story? (share in chat)

What did you procrastinate on? (Are you procrastinating right now!?)

What did you do instead?

Are there certain tasks or situations that you procrastinate most?



YOU'RE NOT ALONE!



This guy cautioned against procrastination in 800 BCE.

80-95% of college students admits to some form of procrastination (Steel, 2007).

What is it that makes us procrastinate?



BUT FIRST, WHAT IS PROCRASTINATION?

procrastinate verb

pro-cras-ti-nate | \ pra-'kra-stə-,nāt , prō-\
procrastinated; procrastinating

Essential Meaning of *procrastinate*

: to be slow or late about doing something that should be done : to delay doing something until a later time because you do not want to do it, because you are lazy, etc.

// He procrastinated and missed the submission deadline.

// He told her to stop procrastinating and get to work.

Full Definition of *procrastinate*

transitive verb

: to put off intentionally and habitually

intransitive verb

: to put off intentionally the doing of something that should be done

Etymologically, *procrastinate* came from *procrastinare*, which means “to put off until tomorrow”.

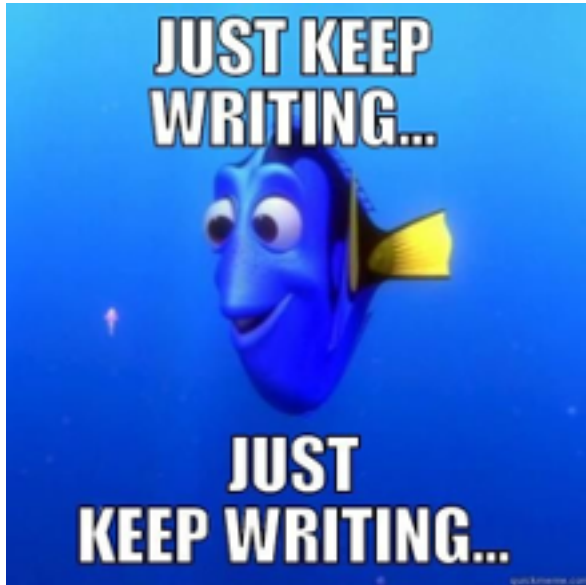
An older etymological cousin: *akrasia* means “doing something against our better judgment”.

→ To procrastinate: To voluntarily delay doing something despite knowing that we will suffer later as a result.

OR, Voluntary and irrational delay of intended action (Steel, 2007)

COMMON PROCRASTINATION SCENARIO

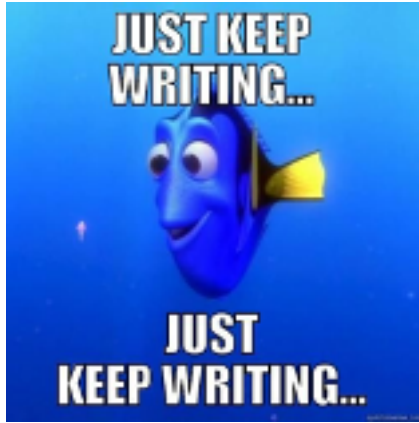
Intended action: write the essay that is due in a week



Procrastination: Binge Netflix



THE ANATOMY OF PROCRASTINATION



Task: Write essay (difficult!)

Reward(s): Good grade. Peace of mind. Comes in a week.

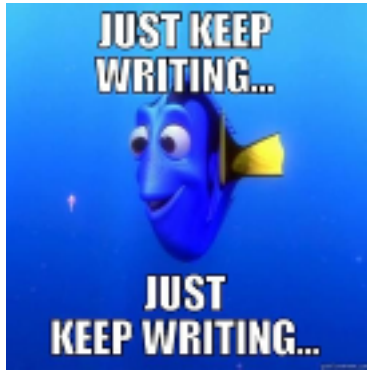


Task: Be a couch potato (easy!)

Reward(s): Fun! Comes immediately

INTERTEMPORAL CHOICE

THE ANATOMY OF PROCRASTINATION



Intertemporal choice: We are making a decision between an earlier reward (often smaller or short-term) reward and a later (often larger or long-term/sustained) reward.

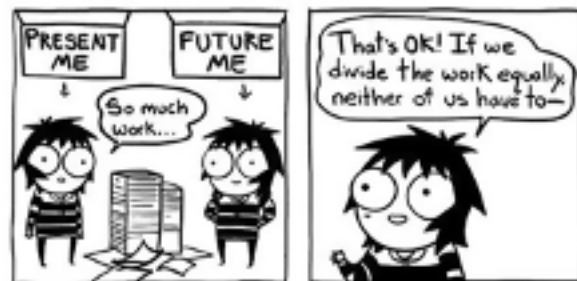
What are some other examples of intertemporal choices in life?

INTERTEMPORAL CHOICE

Examples of common intertemporal choices in life:

- Spend \$50 for a night out, or put it into retirement funds?
- Take a long hot shower, or save water and energy (bc global warming)?
- Smoke, or not smoke (bc health)?
- Eat a cake, or exercise?

We think of the tasks and the associated feelings are somebody else's (our future selves') problems.



INTERTEMPORAL CHOICE: HOW IT FEELS

Psychologically, we perceive events (or their associated rewards or consequences) that are temporally further away as smaller.

The benefit of putting \$50 into retirement funds, environmental consequences of wasting resources, risk of long-term damage to lungs from smoking don't *feel* very salient, so we often just brush them off.

This phenomenon/tendency is called *temporal discounting* (aka *delay discounting*).



INTERTEMPORAL CHOICE

Apply to essay-writing: we perceive the task and its rewards and/or consequences in relation to time.

- The difficulty of the task (or the amount of exertion needed to complete it) seems smaller. (We underestimate the time/force needed)
- The rewards of completing the task seem less enticing. Smaller incentives.
- The negative consequences seem smaller.

So, immediate small reward seems bigger than discounted future reward.

...until the deadline embarks: consequences are closer in time, so they loom over us and we panic,



NO TWO PROCRASTINATORS ALIKE

Why don't my friends procrastinate?

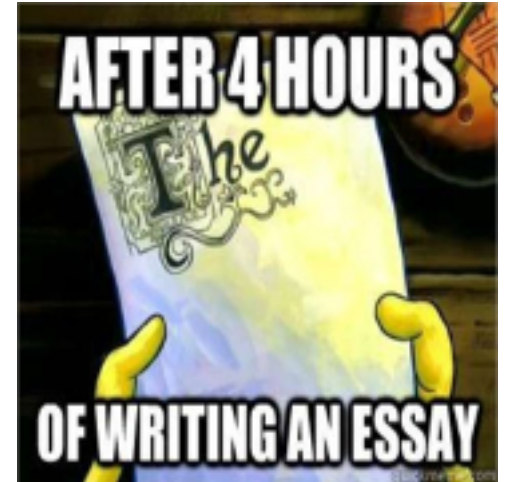
- substantial individual variability in the degree of temporal discounting
- our sense of how close we are to the past and future might be different (temporal psychological distance)
 - people who feel farther away from future events tend to choose immediate rewards (Croote et al., 2020)
 - we might be more sensitive to time delay (Wu et al., 2016)

OUR MOOD MATTERS

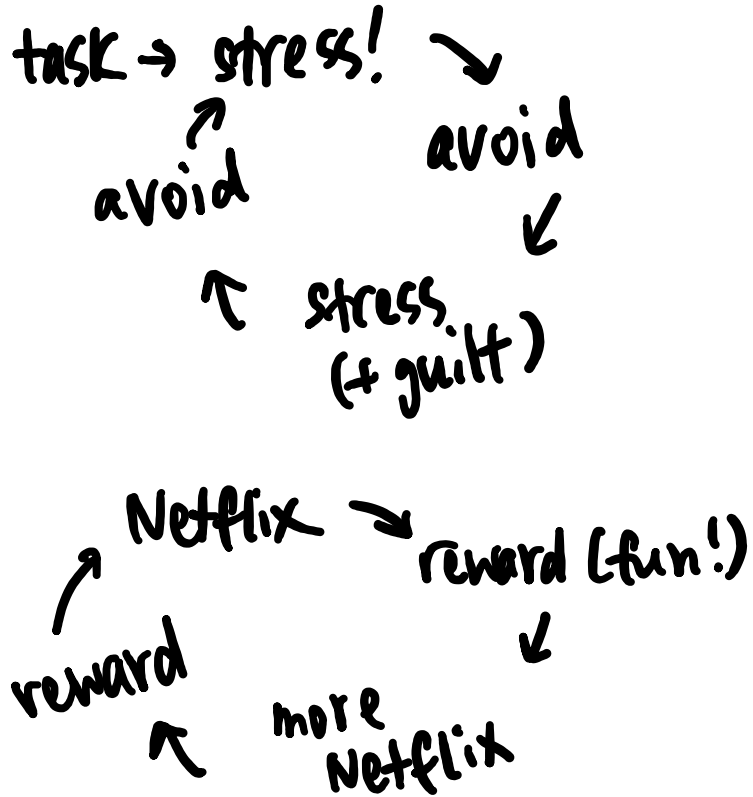
When we avoid a task, we are also avoiding feeling the feelings associated with the task.

Imagine opening up a blank Word document to start writing ... how do you feel?

insecurity, frustration, panic, fear of failure, ... we want to manage these immediately, because we perceive them as threat.



THE VICIOUS MOOD CYCLE OF PROCRASTINATION



Brain is always looking for relative rewards.

People look for alternatives when they think that their mood can change/improve.

The more stressful the task is, the more likely it is for you to put it off and look for alternatives.

ARE WE BEING LAZY OR IRRATIONAL?

It's natural to discount the future.

- We're hard-wired to prioritize short-term needs to long-term ones. (Thank you, evolution.)

It's natural to want to avoid negative emotions.

- We perceive them as actual immediate threat.

Nevertheless, it's not good for you to procrastinate.

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

WHAT IS YOUR NON-PROCRASTINATION STORY?

What did you do to (finally) get to work?

Are there situations that help you focus best?

1. LESSEN THE TEMPORAL DISCOUNTING EFFECT

Shorten the temporal delay by setting personal deadlines.

- Self-imposed deadlines aren't as effective as external ones, but better than nothing. (Ariely and Wertenbroch, 2002)
- Accountability buddies

Make it harder to avoid by making the rewards/consequences bigger

- Make the commitment public, bet money or an embarrassing social media post
- Bigger rewards for yourself (and maybe even earlier)

2. MAKE IT EASIER TO START

Recall: the more difficult the task is (or the more negative feelings you have from it), the more likely you were to try to fix your bad mood.

Decrease task-aversiveness by making the task as easy as possible to start engaging in.

- Dividing tasks into very small parts
 - 30-min run → 2-min sunshine

WHY DOES IT WORK?

End goal: 30-minute run outside

First, very small task: Stand outside in the sun for 2 minutes.

- Pleasant and easy task with high likelihood of success
- This can lead to re-interpretation of the situation so that it changes its meaning and emotional impact (cognitive reappraisal)
- This can effortlessly lead us to the subsequent steps of action
 - How?

WHY STARTING IS HALF OF GETTING THE WORK DONE

You may have experienced that once you start engaging in a task, you get into your zone and continue until you finish it.

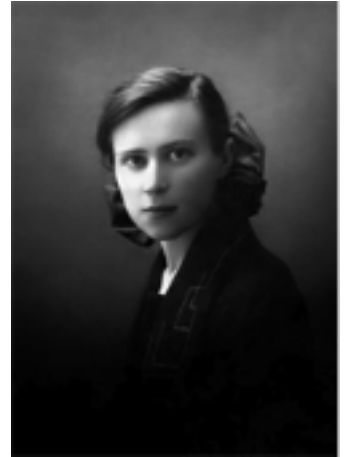
A conscious cognitive shift from one task to another (which is different from multitasking!) is difficult, especially when the prior task is unfinished. (Leroy, 2009)

WHY STARTING IS HALF OF GETTING THE WORK DONE

Zeigarnik effect: we remember incomplete or interrupted tasks better than completed ones.

- This doesn't mean that you shouldn't take breaks or finish everything all at once!
- Take breaks
- Write down tasks, assign to specific time/day, have an end-of-work ritual to get a sense of closure.

Action → Motivation, *not* Motivation → Action



3. MAKE YOUR ALTERNATIVE REWARDS FRUSTRATING

Make it harder to access alternatives

Put obstacles/friction between you and your seductions (source of some frustration)

4. INTERNAL SOLUTIONS

Procrastinators tend to have high stress and low self-compassion.

Students who forgave themselves for procrastinating procrastinated less in the future, perhaps because they were able to focus on the next task without the burden of past actions. (Wohl et al., 2010)

- Acknowledge what you're doing, but don't feed into the negative emotions further.
- Don't judge your work before you've even produced it! Evaluate after you create.
- Find meaning or something positive in the task.

ACTION PLAN

What is something that you can do today to overcome (or lessen) your worst procrastination habits?

What would you suggest?

QUESTIONS?

