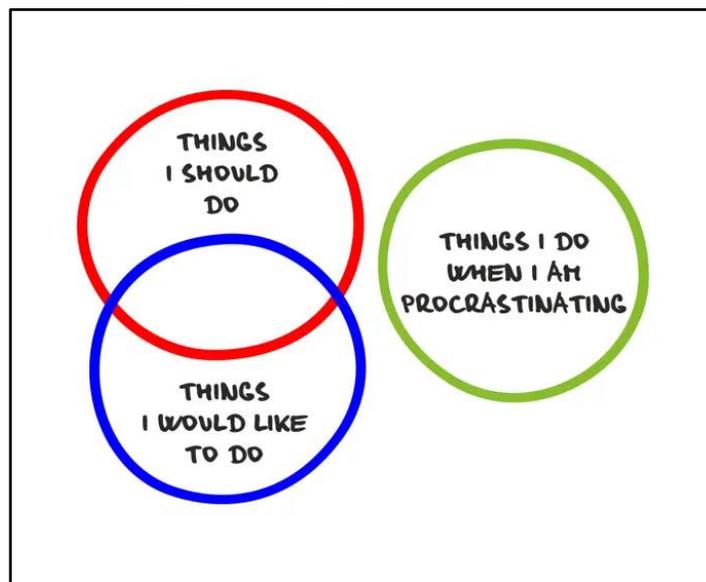


## Rethinking Procrastination: Why it May Not be Real



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## Foreword

During my 35 plus years of counseling with those that have substance abuse/concurrent mental health issues procrastination seems to be a common theme. Typically, it is viewed as someone putting off what is believed to be/could be beneficial or helpful. I've heard it repeatedly on countless occasions: "I'm a procrastinator" almost as if it was a justification for not taking the steps to advance, improve, or move in a different direction in their life. The reasons espoused for procrastinating are too numerous to list in this foreword.

Hence, the author of the following article—a young academic mind, aspiring writer/researcher—was asked to explore the issue of procrastination from a historical, practical, philosophical, and academic perspective.

I have been guilty of procrastination throughout my life. I am very adept at putting off tasks and assignments that I believe will challenge me or be less than enjoyable. These are the primary mental precursors to my procrastination. I've justified this behavior by rationalizing that last-minute stress produced more than stellar results.

Indulge yourself in the writing that follows and see where it leads you in your beliefs about procrastination.

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Yes, you read the title right.

Procrastination is not real; or more conservatively, not as real as many people think. Contrary to the myriad of blogs, articles, and research that discuss procrastination, procrastination should be seen more as a byproduct of modern life and the human inability to navigate/manage, in any practical sense, all modern life's obligations.



To strip a person of everything they have leaves them with only two things: (1) themselves, and (2) time. Procrastination is highly dependent on human constructs such as deadlines (which are self-imposed and self-determined) and time; both of which hold elevated importance (as constructed by humans) within modern culture and society. If any lens of examination be placed on the human record, I believe it would show both humans and the natural world prioritize tasks that have a direct consequential effect on the status of their being, security, health, and perpetuation. In

other words, any task or action which can be procrastinated upon is not truly essential and not truly detrimental or unbearable in the long run if not completed. Essentially, all things are done which need to be done, and all things happen that need to happen. If anything, those with the boundless and uncapped ambition to achieve, acquire, and consume should be the oddities in the eyes of the natural world.

Firstly, to better understand my argument against the concept of procrastination, it should be concisely defined. So then, what do contemporary writings say about procrastination? According to two sources, the first a blog (1), the second an academic article (2), procrastination can be defined in the following ways:

1. *“Procrastination is the act of delaying or putting off tasks until the last minute, or past their deadline. Some researchers define procrastination as a ‘form of self-regulation failure’ [the ability to monitor and manage your energy states, emotions, thoughts, and*

behaviors in ways that are acceptable and produce positive results such as well-being, loving relationships, and learning] *characterized by the irrational delay of tasks despite potentially negative consequences.*"

2. *"An overt or covert act is delayed -> the start or completion of this act is intended -> the act is necessary or of personal importance -> the delay is voluntary and not imposed on oneself by external matters -> the delay is unnecessary or irrational -> the delay is achieved despite being aware of its potential negative consequences -> the delay is accompanied by subjective discomfort -> or other negative consequences."*

The two definitions above imply a few important points that are first alluded to in the opening paragraph of this paper.

Firstly, let's dissect the term *deadline* as used in definition (1). In the opinion of this article, a deadline should be considered no more than a self-applied time constraint that showcases a desire to complete a task within a given timeframe.



Another concept, in addition to the term *deadline*, is self-regulation. Or, more concisely, the conscious application of constraint upon oneself. Secondly, as in definition (2), procrastination is a delay that is *"voluntary and not imposed on oneself by external matters, as participation in modern society is an elective choice/action."* Both points accentuate the fact that procrastination is self-imposed, voluntary, and not dictated by external forces unless conscious participation is desired. The environment that sustains procrastination is entirely dependent on whether the evaluation of self-imposed restrictions and deadlines to be realistic and achievable, or if they are ultimately determined to be unimportant or simply not an immediate priority. This

brief exploration leaves enough room to state the following: due to the malleable nature concerning the rules of self-imposition, procrastination exists only as much as those self-imposed rules allow, and procrastination will cease as easily as it is to change those rules.

The problem is procrastination has less to do with the concept of irrational self-imposed delay, and more to do with being a symptom of self-allocated goals that cannot be realistically completed or attained given the current circumstances—it is a task allocation issue (the way of working/processing/organizing when one individual must balance their responsibilities, demands, and workloads) and not one related to time-delay.

To reiterate, this article argues that the only actions which need to be accomplished are those which are essential to self-perpetuation, whether from a point of conscious thought or unconscious thought—i.e., the need to eat, breathe, connect, and live from, at the very least, the lowest functional level.

Outside of simply arguing against the prevailing definitions of procrastination, arguing against the etiology, or manner of causation is equally as important due to common misconceptions about procrastination and how it arises within individuals. A handful of recent research has suggested that “procrastination is a behavioral problem primarily related to the irrational or dysfunctional beliefs of the individual, for example, perfectionism, unrealistic expectations, and low self-esteem.” Given that procrastination seems to be so highly dependent on an amalgamation of negative personality traits, this quote provides evidence that supports procrastination as nothing more than an umbrella term as decided by experts. This is how procrastination is built and why so many people claim to experience it.

Although this article, as written, attempts to argue against the modern understanding of procrastination, and in essence, against its legitimacy as a behavioral and lifestyle detriment, there are negative impacts on individual health that arise when, as argued previously, self-imposition, deadlines, and attempts at self-regulation are implemented in

ways contrary to practicality and individual ability.

When individuals attempt to adhere to unrealistic expectations and goals, they will undoubtedly experience negative emotions when they fail to meet those expectations. Surely the saying, "*piss poor planning leads to piss poor results*" has never been more relevant. The human psyche frequently employs the unconscious and the physical body to operate far outside of what is healthy in a physical and mental sense, as exemplified by the compounding effect of employee work hours on individual health within corporate environments spread throughout the modern world today.



There is an ever-accelerating drive to complete work within ever more constrained self-imposed deadlines. The intersection between what can be done, and what needs to be done, and the ability to do so is becoming increasingly

indeterminate at the expense of individual health.

Procrastination does not exist in a world that is grounded in essentiality and necessity. The natural world experiences no anxiety about doing, for it is doing, and has been doing all that needs to be done. Today, modern men, women, and children can expect to experience an array of the following mental/physical stressors and ailments if they frequently fail to satisfy deadlines or fall behind on tasks.

| Self-condemnation, personal judgment, feelings of failure, feelings of being unproductive, low grades, low quality of work, insomnia, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, self-blame, immune system and gastrointestinal disturbance, deterioration of personal and work relationships |

Of course, in western society, the individual has been ascribed the blame. But isn't the individual simply an actor on a stage, that stage being modern structural framing of their respective

cultural and social norms? It may be argued that there are only two options then—to either conform or be relegated to the fringes of society—neither of which is ideal. Consider the world’s most important political, technological, religious, and philosophical leaders throughout history. By any conventional means, their ideas seemed radical at the time (in retrospect, some bad, some great), so much so that they may have been alienated from traditional society. In the long-term, though, are they not frequently celebrated for the precedent they set in transforming the human narrative?

Productivity in the 21st century is looked upon as the final and ultimate metric for expense vs. value. Such a conundrum this term has elicited in modern life, that we [humanity] fail to see that the prospect of ever unyielding increases in productivity [that appears to fuel broad swaths of decision making] exists outside universally understood constraints on reality—a contradiction. You cannot experience unyielding growth forever. It’s often asked rhetorically, why wait until tomorrow when it can be done today? But at what point does doing everything

today negatively affect tomorrow. As individuals try to fit more and more into a single day, they will undoubtedly feel as though they have been inundated with procrastination when they fail to satisfy self-imposed deadlines. As per academic research, those who claim to be experiencing or engaging in procrastination will experience an array of adverse effects on their productivity, as outlined below.

People who frequently procrastinate will undoubtedly have a decrease in productivity. This includes an inability to plan, loss of confidence, lack of follow-through, and a pessimistic outlook on the day-to-day activities of life.

1. *Procrastination can be traced back to decreased self-regulation, decreased self-control, decreased action-control, low ability for time management.*
2. *Procrastination holds strong correlations to short term gains and long-term cost.*
3. *Evidence suggests that procrastinators enjoy themselves (the conscious*

experience of their own mind and company) *rather than working at assigned tasks, until the rising pressure of imminent deadlines forces them to get to work.*"

For a moment, reflect on the points outlined above and recognize that each is exclusive to the individual. Perhaps due to cultural inclination in the West, procrastination, in reasoning and origin, is seen as entirely dependent on the individual with little regard to any outside environmental causation, constraints, or influences. In essence, procrastination is seen as a failure of self. Yet, how can this be true when the environment for procrastination to thrive cannot be separated from the individual.



The idea of procrastination is nothing more than a collective gaslighting, a deflection away from the destructive and unsustainable norms of society and the

exorbitant responsibility placed on the individual to do even more at the expense of themselves. It goes without saying that to do nothing is seen as lazy, even though doing nothing is essential for mental and physical health. And to do nothing, in this sense, is simply to experience a singular moment unabated by angst to do evermore. Because who is afforded such a privilege throughout contemporary society? Usually, those who qualify as disadvantaged and advantaged to their respective extremes. For the former, productivity provides little incentive in their lives; for the latter, the measure of productivity is employed as a means to sustain their status passively, for those caught in the middle, however, productivity goes hand in hand with what feels like procrastination. As long as there is an unhinged, radiating desire to fill time, people will continue to feel the constraints of productivity pressures as perpetual bouts of procrastination. The question is, what needs to be done, and what of the unneeded do we elect to do, and in what way does each affect ourselves?

Instead of asking whether you are prone to procrastination first examine the task

you have allocated yourself, the time allotted, and whether or not they are of priority. Careful examination needs to be conducted to determine what is deemed essential and what is not. Consider, for example, verbal agreements have been made to host a get-together with associates, employees, or old acquaintances. Assuredly most would find themselves guilty of putting off the arrangements time and time again, maybe for weeks or months. In addition, let it be known that such an event, while potentially beneficial to self, is also solely elective with no immediate obligation per one's own volition. Would you consider such circumstances to be indicative of procrastination? I think not, and will again state that for the following reasons, procrastination is a construct, one that is unreasonable and irrational. Humans undertake and complete necessary tasks. This does not include tasks that are classified as additional or superfluous in a relative sense. This could be the desire to go to school, buy a new car, attend music lessons, complete a personal project, etc. None of these bring about the instinctual drive for self-preservation/perpetuation. Humans will be compelled to engage and complete tasks, regardless of

circumstances if putting off those tasks causes continued physical pain or distress. Even then, human behavior is not guaranteed to change—every time that pain becomes sustainable, those individuals have constructed a new operational norm and have trouble identifying this as a fact and forgo any potential change.

So how do these individuals go about completing goals, objectives, or tasks that have been self-assigned? This is dependent on three things: (1) immediate environment, (2) essentiality, and (3) available free time. People experiencing task allocation issues must first examine their environments—is this place conducive to what I'm trying to accomplish? Second, is this task essential? By essential, will I lose something that causes immediate mental and physical distress over the long term? Third, how much free time do I have to complete self-assigned tasks or fulfill personal obligations? A recommended course of action to combat task allocation issues would be: (1) Remove yourself from an environment of inaction and relocate to one of action; in essence, go to a place where people are consistently getting

things done. (2) Remove all non-essential tasks from your life that yield little pleasure or have no immediate adverse effects due to their absence. (3) MAKE TIME—arguably the most important. The human brain only works at optimal efficiency for a few hours a day. Trying to complete mentally taxing work after an 8-hour workday could be akin to holding your feet while attempting to walk. To reiterate, environment, essentiality, and time. Consider these three factors, make appropriate adjustments, and perhaps there will be a rise in consistent and reasonable task allocation and regular completion.

With additional research, procrastination will be seen as nothing more than an excuse to sustain productivity science (the research of output and time as a metric of overall performance). Like every muscle, the brain needs a break for rehabilitation and will be inclined to rest whether given explicit permission to or not. As per the *Atlantic* and researchers from the University of Hiroshima:

*“Clicking through photos of cute small animals at work? That's not silly procrastination, Hiroshima University researchers said. Looking at adorable pictures of kittens rolling helplessly in balls of yarn heightens our focus, and the ‘tenderness elicited by cute images’ improves our motor function on the computer. Going on long vacations? You're not running away from your responsibilities. Studies show that long breaks from the office reboot your cognitive energy to solve big problems with the mental dexterity they deserve.”*

Rest assured that these natural inclinations should be considered normal. Without a doubt, the structural evolution of social and cultural obligations of work have far outpaced the biological evolution of the brain. Concepts like procrastination are used as an excuse for those that might underperform in contemporary society, but ultimately perpetuate the unsustainable nature of life in the modern age.

## Citations

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