

A NEW EDITION OF THE SELF-PUBLISHED HIT  
*THE PROCRASTINATOR'S DIGEST!*

# SOLVING THE PROCRASTINATION PUZZLE



**A Concise Guide to Strategies for Change**

**TIMOTHY A. PYCHYL**

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A Concise Guide to Strategies  
for Positive Change



**TIMOTHY A. PYCHYL, PH.D.**

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**SABBATICAL IS A WONDERFUL PART OF THE ACADEMIC LIFE.** It is a tradition where on every seventh year scholars are given time, uninterrupted by teaching and administrative duties, to read, research, and write. I give thanks for this gift of scholarship, and I dedicate my writing to those at my university and faculty association who preserve this important tradition.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**This book began to take shape** from a collection of blog postings for *Psychology Today*. In fact, it was in writing my “Don’t Delay” blog that I discovered how much I enjoyed writing to communicate ideas outside of formal scholarly journal articles. I discovered that instead of “writing to earn” in my “publish or perish” academy, I was “writing to learn” and learning to write in a whole new way. Given this beginning to the book, I want to preface my acknowledgments by giving special thanks to Lybi Ma (deputy editor of *Psychology Today* and author), who invited me to be part of the *Psychology Today* bloggers in 2008 and who has nurtured my sense of self as a writer. As well, I want to thank Hara Estroff Marano (editor at large, *Psychology Today*, and author), who, like Lybi, has always been encouraging and supportive. They are part of a truly wonderful team of people.

Writing is not a solitary activity, even though we may struggle with concepts and the words to express these ideas in our own “dark night of the soul” at times. Writing is a very social act, from the inception of ideas through to revising a final manuscript. So I have quite a few people I want to thank for helping me with my writing. Of course, as my father always told me, you can delegate the activity but not the responsibility; you can share the praise but not the blame. This means that any of the shortcomings in my writing are my own. The things that you like best about this book are most probably due to the kind input of these others who deserve my words of appreciation.

As a scholar, I have drawn on a wide body of research in my writing. Yet, unlike my scholarly publications, I have not cited this work in an academic fashion, so I want to give credit to some key individuals who have developed ideas that I have distilled in this book. In terms of the procrastination research literature specifically, my colleagues Drs. Joseph Ferrari (DePaul University, Chicago), Clarry Lay (retired, York University, Toronto), Henri Schouwenburg (retired, University of

Groningen, The Netherlands), and Fuschia Sirois (Bishops University, Sherbrooke, Quebec) have provided the foundation of ideas about how best to understand procrastination. If I was not drawing on their work directly in my writing, I was speaking to some of my own research that was built on their work. I am grateful to have all of them as colleagues and friends.

In addition to the procrastination research, I drew on numerous other studies that have helped me to understand the nature of self-regulation failure, how we can structure our intentions to more successfully meet our goals, as well as aspects of our personality such as perfectionism that can undermine our goal pursuit. Although it is not possible to list everyone, I do want to note the enormous contributions made by, respectively, Drs. Roy Baumeister and Diane Tice (and their students at Florida State University), Brian Little (retired, Carleton University, Ottawa), Peter Gollwitzer (and his students at New York University), and Gordon Flett (York University, Toronto). I have learned a great deal from each of these scholars, and their work provided a framework for both understanding self-regulatory failure and strategies to more effectively exercise selfcontrol to break nonconscious habits and patterns of behavior.

It is easy to see how these esteemed and accomplished scholars have contributed to my own thinking and research. Not so obvious, but just as important, has been the contribution of my students to my research and writing. My research is driven by my students, as research at the graduate level in particular is a means to teaching and learning. I want to thank all of my students who have participated in procrastination research with me since 1995 as part of the *Procrastination Research Group*, and I particularly want to identify the important contributions made by Shannon Bennett, Kelly Binder, Allan Blunt, Matthew Dann, Mohsen Haghbin, Eric Heward, Jennifer Lavoie, Adam McCaffrey, Rick Morin, Brian Salmon, Matthew Shanahan, Kyle Simpson, and Rachelle Thibodeau. Each of these students has taken his or her own research past the thesis requirements and into the scholarly literature more formally.

Moving from research results to communicable ideas for others to read is a craft unto itself. I am grateful for the help of my wife, Beth, who, as a nonpsychologist, is willing to ask me to clarify my ideas or my words. It takes courage for her to persist at times, I fear, because it is easy for me to become defensive about my writing. I know her thoughtful comments always make my thinking and writing clearer. In addition, my friend Jeannie Bacon, who

was willing to test the strength of friendship by providing her expertise to the editing of my book, has made an important difference in my writing. Jeannie, a writer with both graduate work in English and professional experience in technical writing, helped me to be more coherent and consistent with my prose. Where you still might find problems with my writing are places where I failed to heed her helpful advice.

The comics in the book, which provide a different perspective on the concepts discussed as well as a little laughter at our all-too-human tendency to “put it off until tomorrow,” are due to the talents of my friend Paul Mason. I met Paul when he was a boy and I was living one of my other lives as a canoe outfitter for *Trailhead* in Ottawa. Along with his father, Bill, and his sister, Becky, Paul has developed an international reputation for canoeing and art. I was delighted when he agreed to collaborate with me on a comic series. When a particular comic makes you laugh, you can be sure it was Paul’s creative insight that captured the concept so well.

Each of the people I have identified, plus many others whom I hope I have not offended by omitting them in my words of thanks, have made readily apparent contributions to my research and writing. My final words of thanks are to those whose contributions are more obscure in terms of the writing of this book, yet deeply important to me personally. They make life joyful, provide room for my writing, and bring balance to my life.

My children, Laurel and Alex, along with my wonderful wife, Beth, bring love and laughter to my life. I work hard not to procrastinate on the more mundane tasks in my day simply to be sure that there is time for them! My dog team keeps me firmly grounded and in the great outdoors enough to keep me healthy and happy. Finally, my father, Walter Pychyl, is never far from my thoughts and I draw on his wisdom, love, and support to build a life. Ironically, one of my dad’s most often-used expressions is “We’ll see what happens” as he waits another day to act. I usually laugh and say to him, “No wonder I study procrastination!” Yet within his words is a great deal of wisdom. Sometimes delay may truly be wise and the best course of action. Knowing the difference between procrastination and other forms of delay is a very good place to start. You’ll find some of the reasons why beginning in Chapter 1.

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# INTRODUCTION

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If you are reading this, it is probably because you are bothered by procrastination.

You may be even be reading this because you are procrastinating right now. You are avoiding some other task. I want to make the time you spend off task, right now, worthwhile.

That is the purpose of my writing. An hour from now, you will be prepared to act differently. You will be prepared to be more successful in your goal pursuit.

Are you ready to get started? That is one of my most basic strategies: just get started. In this book, I explain why this works and summarize the research evidence for such a simple, practical strategy.

## About This Book

This is a short book—practical and no-nonsense. Although as short as possible, each concept, topic, and issue presented has been carefully researched.

I have been researching and writing about procrastination for nearly twenty years. You can learn about my research at [procrastination.ca](http://procrastination.ca). This Web site provides access to my research group and academic publications, as well as my iProcrastinate Podcasts and “Don’t Delay” blog for *Psychology Today*. I have had millions of downloads of my podcasts and blog entries. Like this book, these resources are research-based but meant to be very accessible for people who do not normally read psychological research.

The key difference between my blog or podcast and this book is the organization of the ideas. The blog and podcast cover a wide variety of important topics, but you would have to spend days reading or listening to get it all. *The value of this book is that it is a digest of my research, and most important, this book provides a concise summary of key strategies to reduce procrastination in your life.*

## Why Is the Book So Short?

Too often, we start a book, read the first chapter or two, and never pick it up again (although we intend to finish it!). Among procrastinators, this is a terrible risk. In fact, procrastination is defined by this intention-action gap. I do not want to contribute to this, so I have written a short book. It is possible to read the whole thing in a few hours (fast readers may get through the main ideas and key strategies in an hour, in fact).

Most important, I have written a short book because I believe that less is more. It is quite possible for me to write hundreds of pages about this topic. I have in my blog and research, for example. My graduate students regularly write lengthy theses on the topic. However, when it comes to learning strategies for change, a few key ideas are what is required. Working with these ideas in your own life will make a difference. Your reading can make a difference in your life right now—if you want it to.

“If you want it to.” This idea is very important to understand. No technique on its own will ever work without a firm commitment to a goal. *If you are committed to change, I know that what you will learn here will make a difference.* I have received emails from people from all walks of life (e.g., lawyers, students, homemakers, consultants, medical researchers, and even other academics) and from all over the world that attest to the difference that these strategies are making in their lives.

## How the Book Is Organized

I have structured each chapter in a similar way so that the book is easier and quicker to read. You know what to expect in each chapter.

First, I begin each chapter with a key phrase that may become your mantra for change. A mantra is an often-repeated expression or idea. It is commonly associated with meditation as the focus of your thoughts. I think the first sentence of every chapter can serve you best as a daily focus as you work toward change in your life.

When you read a chapter that really speaks to you in terms of your own procrastination, memorize the opening mantra for change; post it on your fridge or on your computer as a screen saver. In short, make it your own and reflect on it often.

Second, I offer an example through a short story that highlights a common problem with procrastination. These stories are based on lived experiences shared with me by research participants, as replies to my blog postings and podcasts, as well as through people I have met at invited talks, workshops, and even at social gatherings (these are people who tell me that they would be the perfect subject for my studies). I hope these stories help situate the issue in lived experience for you.

Third, I summarize the key issue(s) illustrated in the story. Here, I draw on research, but I do not quote dates, names, or other details as I do in my academic papers, blog, or podcasts. I write about the issue and research in simple terms to keep the concepts clear. When I do introduce a term from research, some psychological jargon, I explain what it means.

Fourth, based on the research, I present strategies that you might use to facilitate change in your life. These strategies flesh out the mantra at the beginning of the chapter, linking the issue and what we know from research to things you can do to reduce your procrastination. These strategies are the practical things that you can do to solve the procrastination puzzle in your own life.

As appropriate, I also provide a place for you to rephrase the key ideas in relation to your own life. This is where you make the concepts your own in the context of your own life. This is where you do your first bit of personal work and goal setting.

Finally, you will find at least one comic in each chapter. Paul Mason (an artist, creative genius, and all-around great guy) and I created this series of comics together.



In the comics, we embrace the notion of *carpe diem*. The Latin expression *carpe diem* (which means, literally, “seize the day”) has been used for centuries with contrasting meanings. For example, it has been used to celebrate and defend procrastination with a focus on enjoying the moment—“Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die”—and it has also been used as an admonition, scolding ourselves to focus on the pressing task at hand with expressions such as “make hay while the sun shines.”

Our comics allow us to laugh at our propensity to put it off, while lamenting the tragedy of our inability to seize the day and accomplish our goals. Laugh or cry, we hope you will enjoy the situations we portray. Although the context for these comics is college and university life, I think you will find the themes applicable to other life domains.

OK, enough by way of introduction. Let’s just get started.

What is procrastination?

## What Is Procrastination? Why Does It Matter?



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*All procrastination is delay, but not all delay is procrastination.*

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**MARIA, A WORKING MOTHER** of three young children, reaches the end of her day with lots left to do. Again, she didn't get the laundry put away or the files sorted in her office. She beats herself up, calling herself a procrastinator, yet she's confused about how she'll ever be able to get it all done when so much happens each day that's out of her control. She plans carefully, but kids' illness, changes at the day care, and both her and her husband's travel for work always seem to necessitate change in her plans and delays on some tasks.

### Issue

These examples in Maria's life should *not* be seen as procrastination. We all have to delay things. Delay is part of making priorities. Of course, a child's illness takes precedence over much of what we might plan that day. Other tasks need to be delayed to make time for doctor's appointments, home care, whatever is necessary. The key issue here is that it is not a voluntary delay in the strictest sense.

Procrastination is *the voluntary delay of an intended action despite the knowledge that this delay may harm the individual in terms of the task performance or even just how the individual feels about the task or him- or herself*. Procrastination is a

*needless voluntary delay*. In Maria's case, the delay on putting away the laundry and filing were not truly voluntary. She was not needlessly taking on some alternative task to avoid the laundry or filing. She was optimizing her use of time to meet one of *her* most important life goals: to be the best mother she can.

There are many types of delay in our lives. I believe we need to learn to appreciate this. Some delays are not only necessary, as with the example of Maria's task delay in favor of her children's health, they are wise. We might also decide to delay action on a project because we need more information first. It is wise to put things off at times rather than to act impulsively or hastily.

Delay is a necessary part of our lives. At any given moment, there are any number of things we could do. What will we choose to do? This choice is based partly on our earlier intentions, our plans for the day, but of course, our choice will also depend on the context of the moment. What is happening right now that has an effect on our choices? What is most important now? What is the wisest thing we can do given our goals, responsibilities, roles, and desires?

Procrastination, in contrast to other forms of delay, is that voluntary and quite deliberate turning away from an intended action even when we know we could act on our intention right now. There is nothing preventing us from acting in a timely manner *except our own reluctance to act*.

This is the puzzling aspect of procrastination. Why are we reluctant to act? Why is it we become our own worst enemy?

We undermine our own goal pursuit needlessly. *Why?* How can we solve this procrastination puzzle?

To understand the procrastination puzzle—that voluntary but needless delay in our lives that undermines our goal pursuit—we need to understand this *reluctance to act when it is in our best interest to act*. We also need to have strategies to overcome this reluctance.

The conscious use of strategies to overcome our reluctance to act is essential, because procrastination for many people is a habit. That is, procrastination is a habitual response to tasks or situations, and like all habits it is an internalized, nonconscious process. It is what we do without really thinking about it. In fact, cross-cultural research by Joseph Ferrari at DePaul University (Chicago) has demonstrated that for as much as 20 percent of the

population, this procrastination habit is quite chronic and affects many parts of our lives.

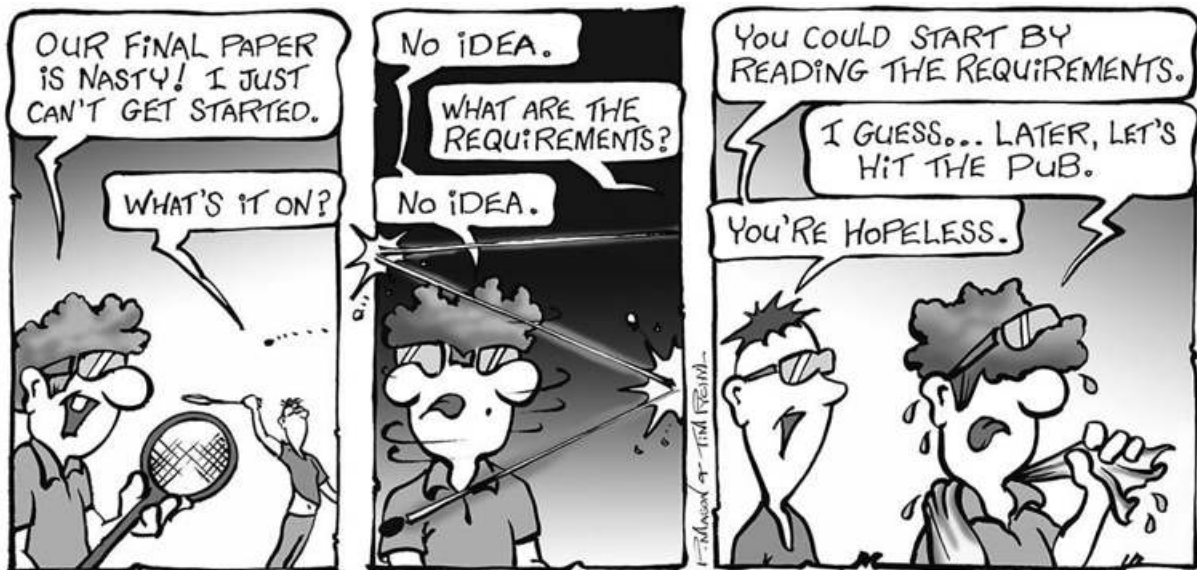
Habits are not easy to change. We need to make conscious effort with specific strategies for change to be successful. Throughout the book, I argue that we need to make *predecisions* to act in a different way, counter to the habitual response. Based largely on the work of Peter Gollwitzer (New York University), I emphasize many different ways that we can use predecisions to act when we intend to act, to reduce the effects of potential distractions, and to cope more effectively with setbacks and disappointments as we work toward changing our behavior.

In the chapters that follow, I explain why we may be reluctant to act on our intentions. Then I offer strategies for change to help develop more effective self-regulation by breaking habitual ways of responding. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to emphasize that not all delay is procrastination, and the importance of focusing on the needless delay that is undermining us.

## STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

My initial strategy for change is for you to begin to categorize in your own mind which delays in your life are procrastination. These are the delays that you want to do something about. Knowing this difference is a good place to start.

As you begin to identify which delays are truly voluntary delays that undermine your performance and well-being, you may see a pattern emerge. These tasks, projects, or intended actions may have something in common. For example, you may find that these tasks, projects, or intended actions elicit common feelings.



In the table that follows (or on a separate piece of paper, or on your computer, or simply as a thought experiment), list those tasks, projects, activities, or “things” in your life on which you tend to procrastinate. Next to each, jot down what emotions and thoughts come to mind when you think of each of these moments of procrastination. Do not overthink this. It could be, for example, that you are uncertain about what to do to complete a task.

When you have finished your list, look for patterns in the emotions or thoughts involved. You will want to refer back to these when reading some of the chapters that follow.



<b>TASK, PROJECT, GOAL, ACTIVITY</b>	<b>FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS ABOUT THIS TASK/GOAL</b>

## Is Procrastination Really a Problem? What Are the Costs of Procrastinating?



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*Procrastination is failing to get on with life itself.*

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I ATTENDED A CONFERENCE a few summers ago titled Living Well and Dying Well: New Frontiers of Positive Psychology, Therapy, and Spiritual Care. During a discussion of coping with death and counseling individuals who are grieving, one of the psychologists in attendance noted two kinds of regrets that people express in their grief over the loss of a loved one: regrets of commission and omission. The second regret, the things we omitted doing while our loved one was alive, captured my interest. Regrets of omission are so often the result of procrastination.

I asked this psychologist, “What is the nature of these regrets of omission?” adding, “Are these:

1. Things people really intended to do but never did (i.e., procrastination)?
2. Generalized possibilities of what they could have done?
3. Cultural scripts of what they think they should have done, what would have been nice to do?
4. Internalized expectations about what the loved one might have wanted them to do?”

The psychologist replied that all four types were part of the regrets he had seen in his practice.

So I pushed on a little further and asked which type of regret seemed most problematic. As I expected, given the guilt associated with procrastination, regret over the things these grieving people really intended to do but did not was most problematic. *The regrets of omission related to our procrastination were most troubling in the grieving process.*

## Issue

Everyone procrastinates. I believe this, and research has documented this in a number of different ways. In fact, I think that people who say that they have never procrastinated might also say that they have never told a lie or been rude to someone. It is possible, I guess, but unlikely. We certainly do not like to admit to these undesirable actions.

So, if everyone procrastinates, why is it a problem?

The research evidence is clear. People who score high on self-report measures of procrastination also self-report lower achievement overall, more negative feelings, and even significantly more health problems. Let me discuss each of these briefly.

The lower achievement is easy to explain. Although we can all remember instances where we procrastinated and did very well (we cherish these memories to make us feel better and to justify even more procrastination), on the whole, procrastination results in less time to do a thorough job. This usually means poorer work overall. A meta-analysis of the procrastination research conducted by Piers Steel (University of Calgary) has shown that procrastination is certainly never helpful and usually harmful to our task performance.

The fact that procrastination is associated with more negative emotions (or moods) is puzzling. If we are procrastinating, you would think we would actually feel better because we are not doing the tasks we do not want to do in favor of things we enjoy. At least that is what you would think we are doing.

The thing is, our research shows that even when we are procrastinating, and I mean when we are actually off task and researchers ask us questions then about our feelings, we do not report feeling happier necessarily. There is a mixture of feelings experienced, including guilt. So, on the whole,

procrastination does not make us feel that great, and this is particularly true in the long run.

Finally, the new research by Fuschia Sirois (Bishops University, Sherbrooke, Quebec) that demonstrates that procrastination actually compromises our health is very interesting. Procrastination seems to affect health in two ways. First, procrastination causes stress, which is not a good thing for our health for many reasons (e.g., stress compromises our immune systems).



Second, chronic procrastinators needlessly delay health behaviors such as exercising, eating healthfully, and getting enough sleep. This affects our health negatively, particularly over time. Sure, not exercising today or not eating vegetables today is not going to harm us today. But you know how it goes: Tomorrow is the same situation, we rationalize one more day of delay, and before we know it, it has been years of neglected (procrastinated) health behaviors. The results can be devastating, with increased risk for heart disease, diabetes, and other debilitating illnesses that can be prevented with more daily attention to simple but avoided health behaviors.