

# Research into procrastination shows surprising findings

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A University of Calgary professor in the Haskayne School of Business has recently published his magnum opus on the subject of procrastination – and it's only taken him 10 years.

Joking aside, Dr. Piers Steel is probably the world's foremost expert on the subject of putting off until tomorrow what should be done today. His comprehensive analysis of procrastination research, published in the recent edition of the *American Psychological Association's Psychological Bulletin*, presents some surprising conclusions on the subject, such as:

- Most people's New Year's resolutions are doomed to failure
- Most self-help books have it completely wrong when they say perfectionism is at the root of procrastination, and
- Procrastination can be explained by a single mathematical equation

"Essentially, procrastinators have less confidence in themselves, less expectancy that they can actually complete a task," Steel says.

"Perfectionism is not the culprit. In fact, perfectionists actually procrastinate less, but they worry about it more."

Other predictors of procrastination include: task aversiveness, impulsiveness, distractibility, and how much a person is motivated to achieve. Not all delays can be considered procrastination; the key is that a person must believe it would be better to start working on given tasks

immediately, but still not start.

It's estimated that about 15-20 per cent of the general population are procrastinators. And the costs of procrastinating can add up well beyond poor work performance, especially for those who delay filing their taxes or planning their retirement.

Steel says motivational failures such as difficulty in sticking to diets and exercise regimes – frequently the focus of New Year's resolutions – are related to procrastination because impulsiveness is often at the root of the failure. "Temptations that are close at hand are difficult to resist. Addicts often relapse after returning from treatment facilities because drugs and alcohol become easily available and daily habits reassert themselves. Or we load up on bread in the restaurant before the meal is served. Or we check our email 10 times an hour instead of completing a project."

The good news is that willpower has an unusual capacity. "The old saying is true: 'Whether you believe you can or believe you can't, you're probably right'," Steel says. "And as you get better at self control, your expectancy about whether you can resist goes up and thus improves your ability to resist."

Steel has also come up with the  $E=MC^2$  of procrastination, a formula he's dubbed Temporal Motivational Theory, which takes into account factors such as the expectancy a person has of succeeding with a given task (E), the value of completing the task (V), the desirability of the task (Utility), its immediacy or availability ( $\tilde{A}$ ) and the person's sensitivity to delay (D).

It looks like this and uses the Greek letter  $\tilde{A}$ :  $Utility = E \times V / \tilde{A}D$

It's still unclear why some people may be more prone to developing

procrastination behaviour, but some evidence suggests it may be genetic. Steel concludes: "Continued research into procrastination should not be delayed, especially because its prevalence seems to be growing."

Source: University of Calgary

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