

Overcoming pandemic procrastination

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Have you noticed that you put things off more during the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, you are not alone.

When COVID-19 emerged, people did not have time to adjust to the new lifestyle and process it. As a result of abrupt changes regarding how people live their lives gave rise, COVID-19 paved the way for mental

health crises—increased stress, anxiety and depressed mood—which over time may increase the risk of chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, diabetes and obesity. To compound matters, when people are fearful, stressed or depressed, they are more likely to procrastinate, and delay or postpone tasks and assignments.

But what exactly happens when you procrastinate?

Procrastination and the brain

Several parts of your brain are involved in procrastination. The [limbic system](#) is a set of brain structures involved in behavioral and emotional responses. Essentially, it adds an emotional lens to your daily life experiences. So yes, you can blame your limbic system for all of our intense emotional experiences in life. The limbic system is also involved in instant gratification, pleasure seeking and survival responses.

The prefrontal cortex is involved in navigating more complex behaviors, such as planning and decision-making. So if you have to choose between watching Netflix and calling your [health care provider](#) to schedule an appointment for your [physical exam](#), your limbic system may win over scheduling because watching Netflix perhaps is more fun and less distressing. Your limbic system may propel you to delay scheduling your appointment in favor of engaging in something that is easier and rewarding. This is what can make a phone call scheduling appointment feel so complex in your mind, resulting in you deciding to delay it for later. If you are anxious about leaving your house safely due to COVID-19—and are stressed about putting your mask on and sanitizing your hands—you may find yourself delaying your health care provider appointments day after day.

Change in behaviors

Before the pandemic, daily schedules and planning helped you stay on track, ensuring you achieved specific goals and completed tasks. But the pandemic changed daily schedules, activities and how to plan the day. Some people who found themselves working remotely from home for the first time in their life noticed how difficult it is to separate workspace from home and relax. They were not used to staying in their home all day now that it also was their office.

The brain tends to associate things together, and that is how habits may form. If you associate your bedroom with sleep, then you fall asleep easier when you go to bed. If you associate eating chips with watching a basketball game, you'll tend to look for things to eat next time you plan to watch a game. Similarly, if you have a stressful job and work from home, you may have noticed that you have associated stress with home or the room you work from remotely.

Such lifestyle change can trigger you to procrastinate and think, "Let me drink a cup of coffee, and then I will finish my project." This could be in the form of 'productive procrastination,' which is when you avoid one task to complete another often unrelated task. "Let me clean my room first, and then I will take care of my work project."

What can you do to overcome procrastination?

To overcome procrastination, ask yourself these questions:

- What tasks do you need to complete, and what are the deadlines? Create a list.
- Which tasks are priority? Rate and order tasks from 1 to 10, with 1 being a priority task and 10 being a nonpriority task that we can attend to later.
- How much time will each task require?
- When can you complete these tasks so that you can add them to

your calendar?

Also, be aware of how you feel. Your thoughts, feelings and behavior are related to one another.

Ask yourself these questions to help find out what is contributing to your procrastination:

- How are you feeling today?
- What thoughts are contributing to such feelings? For example, if you are feeling anxious, it would be a good idea to explore the deeper layers of your thoughts and emotions regarding why you are feeling anxious. Initially, it may be hard to identify these anxiety provoking thoughts and emotions, but over time, it will become easier to name and tame your thoughts, and feel to heal your emotions.
- How are such feelings, such as anxiety, contributing to your procrastination and delaying the completion of your assignments?

Start, and start small.

First, look at the list of tasks that you need to complete, such as scheduling a health care provider appointment, buying groceries or picking up your medications from the pharmacy. Pick one task that you ranked as high priority and try to break it into smaller tasks.

Procrastination often make you think of tasks as one giant task that will not be completed or one that takes a substantial amount of time to complete. By breaking tasks into smaller ones, you notice that the intended task was not as difficult as it seemed. For instance, if you have to schedule a health care provider appointment, one sub-task would be to look at your schedule to see what days you would be available. Another

sub-task would be to check and see if you need a ride to your appointment, and if so, who can give you one.

On your calendar, make notes of when you want to engage in these tiny tasks. Planning is another key factor in winning over procrastination.

The next step is often difficult: To start. To win over procrastination is to force yourself to start a task, no matter how tiny. For example, if you need to exercise, but you are dreading starting, begin by going for a 10-minute walk. Is that too much? How about five minutes? Remember, start small.

Work with a partner.

Accountability is crucial. Work with a family member, friend or colleague, and help each other. Touch base with your partner each day or at least once a week with a phone call, text or email. Plan your days and weeks, talk about priorities, and check in by reviewing how things are going.

A partner can be a motivator and offer support if you start feeling discouraged.

Add some separation.

As mentioned, the mind associates things together. So if you work remotely, try to dedicate one specific room or a corner of your home to working remotely. If you take a break, go to a different room or a separate space for that.

Don't browse through social media in the same room where you work. It would be best not to even use the same device you use for work to browse through social media during your break. Such separation will

help you have more meaningful breaks and relax more. Moreover, when workday ends, housework can be daunting. Pay attention to your body, energy levels and self-care, and don't be afraid to say no when being pressured into additional work. Practice setting healthy boundaries for yourself by learning how to say no in a firm and kind way.

Establish a routine.

Setting firm work hours also can help. Start at the same time each day, even if your supervisor isn't watching. Dress up as if you are physically going to work. Add health breaks, like a short walk, stretching, yoga or deep breathing to relax. Go to bed at the same time each night.

Reward yourself.

Once you complete a task, mark your calendar and reward yourself. This reward does not need to be anything big or expensive. For example, it could be watching an episode of your favorite show, watching a movie or making a healthy smoothie. Again, remember that our mind likes association. By rewarding yourself, you become more motivated to complete tasks as scheduled so you can be rewarded.

Be gentle with yourself.

We are human beings, not human doings, and at some point, we fail. Failing once or twice does not mean that we fail every time. If you fail, keep trying, think positively and use positive self-talk to encourage yourself to help you reach your goals.

In addition, research shows that mindfulness and self-compassion can help with procrastination. These practices are about overcoming negative emotions. People who can acknowledge their mistakes or other personal failings, and then forgive themselves for it, are less likely to

procrastinate. Also, people who practice mindfulness exercises are more likely to stay on [task](#).

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