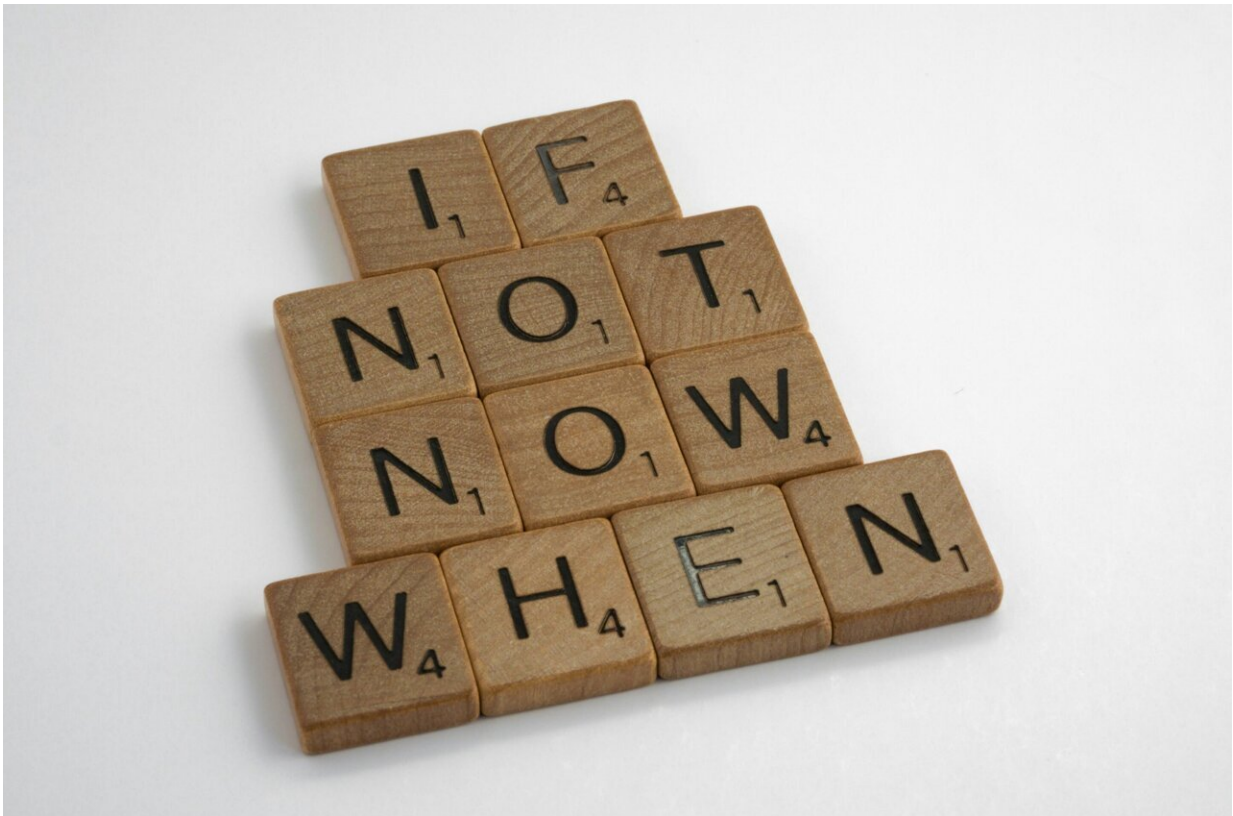


A mental process that leads to putting off an unpleasant task

March 1 2024, by Emily Caldwell



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Putting off a burdensome task may seem like a universal trait, but new research suggests that people whose negative attitudes tend to dictate their behavior in a range of situations are more likely to delay tackling

the task at hand.

The psychological term to describe this mental process is called valence weighting [bias](#), which describes people's tendency to adapt in new circumstances by drawing more strongly from either their positive or negative attitudes—or, in the context of approaching an unpleasant task, whether negative or positive internal "signals" carry the most weight in guiding the final behavior.

"And the question is, which wins that battle—if, indeed, there are elements of both positivity and negativity?" said Russell Fazio, senior author and professor of psychology at The Ohio State University.

In a series of studies, Fazio and first author Javier Granados Samayoa, a former Ohio State graduate student, found links between a more negative-leaning attitude and procrastination. They also found it's possible to shift the weighting bias of strong procrastinators toward neutrality and reverse their tendency to delay a task.

"We're looking at this consideration of the positives and negatives that exist when people are making decisions and how valence weighting bias shapes which route people take," Granados Samayoa said.

The research was published recently in the journal [Personality and Individual Differences](#).

The first of three studies tested a real-world scenario: preparing a federal tax return.

"The idea is that people, at least for a brief moment, are asking the question, 'Do I want to do this now?'" Fazio said. "And there really are both positive and negative signals: 'I certainly don't want to do that. It's an aversive task.' That's the negative signal. But then there's also a

positive signal: 'I've got to get it done, and I'll feel good if I do it right'."

A sample of 232 participants reported whether they routinely filed returns early or late during tax season. With that data in hand, Fazio and Granados Samayoa used a [research tool](#) to gauge the extent to which participants weighed positive or negative signals more strongly when encountering something new.

Their analysis showed an association between a more negative weighting bias and a delay in submitting a tax return.

"What we find is that people whose negative attitudes generalize more strongly tend to engage in unnecessary task delay to a greater extent," Granados Samayoa said.

The second study involved 147 [college students](#) in a program allowing them to accumulate course credit in exchange for participating in research.

In addition to gauging the students' weighting bias, the study explored whether students' measures of self-control influenced task-related behavior: How did students characterize their level of motivation or capacity to mull over their initial thoughts about the research program, and did that affect whether students got an early start on research participation or put it off?

Results showed the combination of negative weighting bias and self-reported low motivation or emotional energy for effective self-control was linked to students putting off research program participation by getting started later in the semester.

"The first study established the basic effect of negative weighting bias, but study two provides some nuance," said Granados Samayoa, now a

postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania.

"For people who don't think about it too much or can't think about it too much, their valence weighting tendencies guide their behavior in a straightforward manner. But if somebody is more motivated and able to think more about it, that might bring other considerations that dampen the influence of the valence weighting bias."

Study three was designed to look for a causal effect of valence weighting bias in completing or delaying a task. Students in the research-for-credit program who were self-reported procrastinators and who scored high for negative weighting bias were recruited for the study.

Researchers then manipulated the valence weighting bias tool for one group in a way that led participants to weigh positive and negative signals in a more balanced way. This shift toward neutrality changed students' behavior: They accumulated credit hours more quickly than the control group, whose negative weighting bias and low [self-control](#) reliably predicted their delay in securing extra credit.

Negative weighting bias can have a positive effect on behavior, too. These researchers have also found evidence that a negative weighting bias may help people be more realistic when they're asking themselves, for example, "Have I studied enough for this test?" A positive weighting bias may lead people to convince themselves they're ready when they're not.

"It's better to be more objectively balanced than to be at either extreme," Fazio said. "But the situation where a particular valence weighting bias is likely to be problematic is going to vary."

More information: Javier A. Granados Samayoa et al, Do I want to do this now? Task delay as a function of valence weighting bias, *Personality*

and Individual Differences (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2023.112504](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2023.112504)

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: A mental process that leads to putting off an unpleasant task (2024, March 1) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-03-mental-unpleasant-task.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.