

Optimism wards off procrastination: Believing the future will not be more stressful could help procrastinators

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Optimistic or pessimistic?: It is common to have a mix of optimistic and pessimistic views on life and for these to change over time. While optimists are so called for their characteristic tendency to find the good in things and hold a positive outlook, pessimists are likely to have less hope for the future which can impact their current lived experiences as well. Credit: Saya Kashiwakura, created with the assistance of DALL-E, CC BY 3.0

People with an optimistic outlook on the future are less likely to be severe procrastinators, according to new research at the University of Tokyo.

While procrastinators often admonish themselves for their "[bad habit](#)," it turns out that their worries for the [future](#) are more to blame. Through a survey of nearly 300 [young people](#), researchers found that those who had a positive view about their [stress levels](#) decreasing in the future, compared to the past or present, were less likely to experience severe [procrastination](#). Views on personal well-being didn't appear to have an effect. Improving people's outlook and readiness for the future could help them overcome procrastination and achieve a less stressful lifestyle.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

How many times have you made a "to do" list, and although the most important task is at the top, you seem to be working your way up from the bottom or distracted by something else entirely? While we might chide ourselves for procrastinating, sometimes the more we try to overcome it, the more stressed we feel and the cycle continues. That is how it was for graduate student Saya Kashiwakura from the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tokyo, so she decided to investigate why.

"I have struggled with procrastination since childhood. I would clean my room when I needed to study for a test and prioritize aikido practice over my postgraduate research. This habit of putting off important tasks has been a constant challenge," said Kashiwakura. "I wanted to change my behavior, as I realized that I was not confronting the future impact of my actions."

This inspired Kashiwakura to examine the relationship between procrastination and the procrastinator's perspective on time, particularly their view of the future. When she began researching procrastination, she was surprised to discover that many more people suffer from it than she had imagined, and found it reassuring that her problems were not unique.

Previous research has shown that a feature of procrastination is disregard for the future or difficulty linking present actions with future outcomes. However, the reasons for this have been unclear. Kashiwakura and co-author Professor Kazuo Hiraki, also from UTokyo, proposed that it might be because severe procrastinators have a more pessimistic outlook.

The researchers surveyed 296 participants in Japan in their 20s for their views on stress and well-being, and importantly how these had changed over time. This included asking about their experiences from 10 years in the past through to the present, and their expectations for 10 years in the future. From the results, participants were clustered into one of four groups (for example, if they thought their situation would improve or would stay the same), and then each group was divided into severe, middle and low procrastinators.

"Our research showed that [optimistic people](#)—those who believe that stress does not increase as we move into the future—are less likely to have severe procrastination habits," explained Kashiwakura. "This finding helped me adopt a more light-hearted perspective on the future, leading to a more direct view and reduced procrastination."

It was not only the level of stress people experienced, but how their perception of it changed over the 20-year time period discussed, which influenced their procrastination habits. Surprisingly, a relationship wasn't found between procrastination and [negative views](#) on well-being, such as one's attitude towards oneself, or not yet finding purpose and goals in

life.

Using these results, the team wants to develop ways to help people nurture a more optimistic mindset and overcome procrastination. "We hope our findings will be particularly useful in the education sector. We believe that students will achieve better outcomes and experience greater well-being when they can comprehend their procrastination tendencies scientifically, and actively work on improving them, rather than blaming themselves," said Kashiwakura.

"Thoughts can change with just a few minutes of watching a video or be shaped by years of accumulation. Our next step is to investigate which approach is appropriate this time, and how we can develop the 'right' mindset to lead a happier and more fulfilling life."

More information: Saya Kashiwakura et al, Future optimism group based on the chronological stress view is less likely to be severe procrastinators, *Scientific Reports* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-024-61277-y](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-61277-y)

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