

# Dr Dan *for Today*

## How to Stop Procrastinating

Henry Ford is quoted as saying, “whether you think that you can, or that you can't, you are usually right.” You will have the greatest success if you read or reread my last article on procrastination and take some time to observe your own procrastination patterns. Once you have accomplished that, choose a few of the strategies outlined here. Keep working at it until you understand what you need to do to *stop putting things off* and ask yourself, “What would I attempt to do if I knew I would not procrastinate?”

### **Set Specific Goals**

The most effective goals are specific, measurable, and achievable. An example of a good goal is, “I will buy paint on Friday and paint the living room on Saturday.” This is better than saying, “I am going to get the house ready to sell.”

### **Set Priorities**

Write down all the things that you need to do, and place them in order of importance. The most important tasks belong at the top of your list and the distractions go at the bottom. Start at the top of your list and work your way down.

### **Organize Your Work**

Set up a system for yourself. Prepare a daily schedule and keep it within view during your working or school time. List the tasks for each day. Check things off as you complete them. When you are working on a project, lay out all of the needed supplies or materials before you begin.

### **Divide and Conquer**

Sometimes a project is overwhelming if you think about all of the work that is involved. Do yourself a favor: break the activity down into smaller steps and set progress goals for each of the steps. This is especially helpful when you are beginning a writing project, studying for a class, or building a new set of skills.

For example, if you need to write a report, make an outline before you start writing. If you have to clean your house, make your goal to do the first two rooms by 10:00, two more by noon, and two more by 2:00. Check tasks off your outline as you complete them.

### **Make It a Game**

Turn the temptation to avoid working into a challenge. Use your imagination. For example, if you need to study the first five chapters of your history book, pretend that you are a substitute teacher and will need to lecture on the material tomorrow. Take notes and organize the information into an outline that you could speak from. Sometimes changing the frame around a situation makes it more interesting and less of a chore.

### **Schedule a Small Amount of Time**

Tell yourself that you will only spend ten minutes on the task right now, just to get your feet wet. Work on the task for the ten minutes and then choose whether to continue for ten *more* minutes. Continue doing this until you decide to stop, or when you are finished with the task. If you stop working on the task before it is finished, spend a few more minutes to plan a strategy for the next steps.

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When you are tempted to substitute a fun but unimportant activity (such as reading a magazine or texting a friend) for an important project (such as finishing pages of your report), make the substitute activity your reward for doing the important task. Do the high-priority job first and reward yourself with the fun activity.

## **Ward Off Self-Defeating Thoughts**

Telling yourself that you are going to do a poor job or even fail can seriously undermine your ability to function. It is important to realize that your negative statements are not facts, but only reflect your feelings. Feelings don't necessarily equal facts. Keep your focus on the present moment and the positive steps you can take toward accomplishing your goals. If these thoughts are based on a need for perfection or low self-esteem (described in the "Managing Perfectionism" article), you may want to work on these issues.

## **Make a Commitment**

Make a verbal and written commitment to complete the task or project. Write a contract and sign it. Tell someone about your plans and ask them to follow up with you. One teacher wanted to create a how-to workbook and market it to other teaching professionals. After weeks of procrastination, she decided to motivate herself by creating a deadline. She wrote an ad for the workbook and placed it in the professional publication that she knew her colleagues would be reading. When her telephone began to ring with orders for the workbook, she suddenly became very focused.

## **Remind Yourself**

Write notes to yourself and post them in conspicuous places. Leave them where you will see them—on places like the desk top of your computer, the bathroom mirror, refrigerator, television, your bedroom or locker door, and the dashboard of your car. The more often you remind yourself of what you plan to accomplish, the more likely it is that you will follow through with action.

## **Reward Yourself**

Reinforcement is a very effective way to motivate yourself. When you complete even the most minor task, be sure to acknowledge what you have done. This is especially important in the beginning when you are struggling with procrastination behaviors. After you have mastered these issues and have regained your peak productivity, don't forget to celebrate the completion of the big projects. You worked hard for it and shouldn't take it for granted. Remember, procrastination breeds more avoidance and "inertia". Success builds on itself and breeds more success. It is much easier to keep an object moving than to get it moving in the first place. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "Always bear in mind that your own resolution to success is more important than any other one thing."

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