

## Why Do I Put Things Off Even When I Know It Will Make Me More Stressed?

You know you need to do it.

Make the phone call. Pay the bill. Sort out the paperwork. Finish the thing you started. Organise everything before you go away.

And you also know that putting it off is probably going to make you more stressed.

So why do you still find yourself watching television, starting something completely different, scrolling on your phone or suddenly deciding that now would be an excellent time to tackle another job?

We often think of procrastination as a problem with motivation.

*Why can't I just get on with it?*

But sometimes procrastination isn't really about the task at all. It's about how the task makes us **feel**.

### The feeling before the task

Some things are relatively easy to do, but they don't feel easy before we start them. A phone call to sort out a bill might involve being passed from person to person, sitting on hold and trying to explain the same thing several times. A complicated piece of paperwork might bring the immediate thought:

*Where do I even start?*

And sometimes there is uncertainty involved.

*What if the outcome is bad? What if I hear something I don't want to hear?*

Suddenly, doing something else feels much more appealing. Not necessarily because we're lazy or don't care, but because avoiding the task gives us a little relief from the dread, anxiety or overwhelm attached to it. For a while, anyway.

### Avoiding it doesn't mean we've forgotten it

The problem is that the unfinished task doesn't usually disappear from our minds just because we've decided not to do it.

It follows us around.

We might be watching television while simultaneously thinking:

*I really should be doing that.*

We start another project, but the unfinished one is still sitting somewhere in the background. Then the conversation with ourselves begins.

*Why do I always do this? I should have finished this already. It isn't even that difficult. Why can't I just get motivated? I've wasted so much time thinking about doing it instead of actually doing it.*

The thing we avoided because it made us anxious can end up creating even more anxiety.

## **And then comes the mad rush**

Eventually, something changes.

Usually, we're running out of time. The deadline is tomorrow. The holiday is about to start. We need the thing finished before we leave.

Suddenly there is no longer the option of putting it off.

So we do it.

Sometimes in a slightly frantic, last-minute rush. And then comes the particularly irritating part: *That actually wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be.*

Which is often followed immediately by: *Why didn't I just do that earlier?*

## **Sometimes starting is the hardest part**

When we procrastinate, we can spend a lot of time waiting to *feel motivated*. But motivation doesn't always arrive before we begin. Sometimes it appears after we've started.

Breaking something down can help. Instead of *I need to sort all of this out*, the first job might simply be opening the document, finding the phone number or putting the first few things away.

Removing distractions can help too.

For some people, music, a podcast or an audiobook makes a repetitive job easier to tolerate. Taking a break can be useful when something becomes tedious rather than expecting yourself to keep going until it's finished.

Lists can help. And sometimes lists don't help at all. There isn't one clever trick that suddenly turns us into people who never put anything off.

## **What if you stopped giving yourself such a hard time?**

There's another part of procrastination that's easy to overlook: how quickly we turn it into a judgement about ourselves.

*I'm so disorganised. I'm lazy. Why am I like this?*

But perhaps there is another question we could ask:

### **What is it about this task that I'm finding difficult right now?**

Maybe you're overwhelmed. Maybe you don't know where to begin. Maybe you're worried about the outcome. Maybe it's tedious and you're already exhausted.

Or perhaps you've simply been busy doing other things and haven't had the capacity you thought you should have had.

Understanding why we're avoiding something doesn't mean we never have to do it. The bill still needs paying. The phone call still needs making. The suitcase still needs packing.

But understanding what is happening can make it easier to work *with* ourselves rather than spending all that time fighting ourselves first.

 **Therapist's Reflection:** I think many of us have had the experience of finally doing something we've been avoiding and thinking:

*That was it?*

We can spend far more time worrying about a task, avoiding it and criticising ourselves for not doing it than the task eventually takes. I'm interested in what happens **before** we procrastinate.

That moment when something feels overwhelming, uncomfortable, boring or uncertain and doing almost anything else suddenly seems preferable.

Sometimes the hardest part of a task isn't actually doing it. **It's sitting with how we feel before we start.**

So perhaps the next time you notice yourself avoiding something, rather than immediately asking:

*Why can't I just get on with it?*

you might try asking: **What am I trying not to feel right now?**

The answer might tell you more than another to-do list ever could.

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