

Excerpt from

“The Procrastination Doom Loop—and How to Break It”

by Derek Thompson

1 Productive people sometimes confuse the difference between reasonable delay and true procrastination. The former can be useful (“I’ll respond to this email when I have more time to write it”). The latter is, by definition, self-defeating (“I should respond to this email right now, and I have time, and my fingers are on the keys, and the Internet connection is perfectly strong, and nobody is asking me to do anything else, but I just . . . don’t . . . *feel* like it.”).

2 When scientists have studied procrastination, they’ve typically focused on how people are miserable at weighing costs and benefits across time. For example, everybody recognizes, in the abstract, that it’s important to go to the dentist every few months. The pain is upfront and obvious—dental work is torture—and the rewards of cleaner teeth are often remote, so we allow the appointment to slip through our minds and off our calendars. Across several categories including dieting, saving money, and sending important emails, we constantly choose short and small rewards (whose benefits are dubious, but immediate) over longer and larger payouts (whose benefits are obvious, but distant).

3 In the last few years, however, scientists have begun to think that procrastination might have less to do with time than emotion. Procrastination “really has nothing to do with time-management,” Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University, told *Psychological Science*. “To tell the chronic procrastinator to *just do it* would be like saying to a clinically depressed person, *cheer up*.”

4 Instead, Ferrari and others think procrastination happens for two basic reasons: (1) We delay action because we feel like we’re in the wrong mood to complete a task, and (2) We assume that our mood will change in the near future. See if you recognize any of these excuses. . . .

- If I take a nap now, I’ll have more focus later.
- If I eat this cake now, that’ll be my cheat for the month, and I’ll have more willpower.
- If I send a few Tweets now, my fingers will be used to typing sentences, which will make this article easier to write.
- If I watch TV now, I’ll feel relaxed and more likely to call the doctor’s office tomorrow morning.

5 This approach isn’t merely self-defeating. It also creates a procrastination doom loop. Putting off an important task makes us feel anxious, guilty, and even ashamed, Eric

Jaffe wrote. Anxiety, guilt, and shame make us less likely to have the emotional and cognitive energy to be productive. That makes us even less likely to begin the task, in the first place. Which makes us feel guilty. Which makes us less productive. And around we go.

6 One thing that can cut through the doom loop is the inescapable pressure of an impending deadline. So what's the best way to design deadlines to make us more productive?

7 People often schedule reminders to complete a project significantly before the deadline, so they have time to complete it. But this strategy often backfires. Some practiced procrastinators are both "present-biased" (they choose ESPN.com or *BuzzFeed* over work every time) and overconfident about their ability to remember important tasks, according to a new paper by Keith M. Marzilli Ericson. As a result, they often put off assignments, only to forget about it until long after the deadline. Procrastination and forgetfulness are bad, independently. Together, they're a double-headed meteor hammer smashing your productivity to tiny little bits.

8 To hack your way to productivity, you could schedule one-shot reminders as late as possible—even slightly *after* you were supposed to start the project. Not only will the last-second reminder and looming deadline break the doom loop and shock you into action, but also it won't give you time to put off—and, potentially, forget about—the task.

9 For pathological procrastinators, recognizing that we need deadlines to bind ourselves to our responsibilities is the first step. The second step is recognizing that our own deadlines are less effective than other people's deadlines.

10 In one famous experiment, Dan Ariely hired 60 students to proofread three passages. One group got a weekly deadline for each passage, a second group got one deadline for all three readings, and the third group chose their own deadlines. Readers were rewarded for the errors they found and penalized a dollar for each day they were late. Group II performed the worst. The group with external deadlines performed the best. "People strategically try to curb [procrastination] by using costly self-imposed deadlines," Ariely and his co-author Klaus Wertenbroch concluded, "and [they] are not always as effective as some external deadlines."

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