

Stop Procrastinating

You know what needs to be done. You've set aside time to do it. And somehow, it doesn't happen. That gap between knowing and doing is a familiar frustration for many of us and it isn't always a planning problem. Most people already have perfectly good schedules and time management tools. Procrastination is different — a failure of emotional self-regulation, not of time management.

Avoidance, not adaptation

It helps to separate procrastination from something it's easily confused with: legitimate flexibility. Changing a plan for a good reason — reprioritising an urgent task, stepping away because you genuinely need to manage your energy — isn't procrastination. Procrastination is active avoidance: consciously turning away from something you fully intend to do, in favour of a distraction.

It's often defined as a voluntary, irrational delay in the face of an expected negative outcome. You know it will cost you later — a lost weekend, added stress — and you do it anyway. That's not a failure of intelligence or discipline. It's the mind trading a real long-term cost for a small, immediate sense of relief from an uncomfortable feeling — boredom, anxiety, overwhelm. The relief itself is short term and often an illusion: people who procrastinate frequently report lower achievement and more negative feelings overall, not less, but the short term relief feels real.

Why do we procrastinate: Matching the response to the trigger

We procrastinate over different things for different reasons. Specific triggers call for tailored responses. If the task feels overwhelming, break it into something small enough to start and finish right now. If distractions are the problem, remove them physically and decide in advance what you'll do when temptation hits. If motivation is missing, connect the task to something that genuinely matters to you. If the task feels difficult, focus on progress made or commit to just 30 minutes work rather than the discomfort of starting. If the trigger is fear of failure or judgement, reframe the goal from perfect to good enough and done, and treat setbacks as information rather than a verdict.

Deciding in advance

The bridge between knowing these potential solutions and actually using them is an implementation intention — a simple if-then plan made in advance, so the decision doesn't have to be made in the moment when willpower is already low. For example: if I see myself thinking “I'll just quickly check my email,” then the response is: “I know what this is,” then a breath, a stretch, and back to the task. Naming the mechanism in advance makes it usable when it's actually needed.

A useful phrase to have ready in the moment itself: “I don't feel good about doing this right now, but I know I won't feel better later.”. It's a way of naming the discomfort honestly, without buying into the false promise that avoidance offers relief.

When it happens anyway

Everyone slips. Harsh self-criticism after a lapse tends to predict more avoidance next time, not less — it generates exactly the negative emotion that triggers procrastination in the first place. A brief acknowledgement of the lapse, some self-forgiveness, and a gentle restart predicts far less avoidance overall.

If procrastination shows up often, it's worth checking what it's actually pointing to. Sometimes it's genuinely about emotional avoidance. Other times it's a sign the workload itself has become unmanageable, and no amount of self-forgiveness fixes that — it's worth pairing this with a proper look at time and energy management instead.

This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins.
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