

How to Control Procrastination

A Compilation of Marty Nemko's Writings

By Jeremy Fisher



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Aren't you sick of hearing, "But you have so much potential"?

I don't know about you, but I believe my life's worth is defined by what I've produced. Every time I forgo productivity in favor of TV, golf or gardening, I feel I'm wasting life's most precious resource—time.

The following ways to reduce procrastination have often worked for me and/or my clients. I hope you'll find at least one worth trying.

Set a big goal. Goethe said, "Dream no small dreams for they have no power to move the hearts of men." So what's the most exciting goal you might achieve if you put your mind to it? Even if you're unsure you could do it, might partial achievement or simply enjoying the process be good enough?

Picture the benefits of achieving your goal. Money? Fame? Self-esteem? A more meaningful life? Getting your spouse off your back?

Recognize that success lies mainly within you. Stop believing such nonsense as "The world is abundant. It will provide" or "It's in the hands of fate." Yes, luck matters but success is, large measure, in your hands, although it sometimes requires the help of others you trust.

Recruit a partner. Compensate for your lack of drive by adding some firepower to your project as necessary.

Be aware of the “moment of truth.” That's when you decide, usually subconsciously, whether you should work or play. By making that choice consciously, you'll more often choose the productive activity.

Start big projects NOW. It's tough to determine, in advance, how long a big project will take. So waiting until the last minute greatly increases the risk you'll do a bad job. Make this rule inviolate: I will start a big project as soon as it is assigned to me.

How do you get motivated to stick with that rule? Remind yourself that if you start right away, the project will be more fun:

- You'll avoid the stress of trying to get it done well at the last minute.
- You'll have time to play around with the parts you like to do—for example, toying with words or illustrating.
- If you're done early, you'll have a chunk of free time that you can enjoy without the project hanging over your head.
- You'll likely have done a better job, which will yield more praise and make you proud of yourself.

Use the mantra "Make it fun; more will get done." Constantly ask yourself, "What's the fun way to do this task?"

Struggle for no more than one minute. If you haven't made progress within a minute, additional struggling probably won't help. It merely will make you procrastinate more in the future as you recall the pain you experienced in doing previous tasks. After the one-minute mark, get help or try to figure out a way to do the project without the hard part.

Avoid perfectionism, especially on first drafts. Just get it on paper. It's far easier to revise your way to perfection than to generate it out of thin air.

Embrace discipline. Intelligence and discipline are the biggest factors differentiating successful people from unsuccessful ones. What does discipline mean? A few examples:

- Be willing to stay focused on a task, taking breaks only when necessary, until the task or a component of it is complete. One model that works is *The Pomodoro Technique*: Use one of those tomato-shaped kitchen timers. Okay, any timer will do. Set it for 20 minutes. Work until it rings, then take a five-minute break. Work another 20 on, 5 off, and then a third 20 and 10 off. Repeat as needed.
- Be willing to fight past the discomfort of not knowing: Struggle to master something, be willing to expose your deficiencies by asking a co-worker a question, or hire a tutor or mentor to accelerate your learning.
- Work longer hours. We tend to suppress the obvious truth that the longer you work at your profession or avocation, the better you'll get.

Light Your Fire! A Matchbox of Ways to Get Motivated.

Many people know what they should do: get serious about career, find a good romantic partner, start saving money, lose weight, stop smoking, start exercising, whatever. Yet they can't seem to make themselves.

These techniques have helped many of my clients. Might one or more help you?

Realize it matters, big-time. Many people feel they can get away with procrastinating. I hate to be the bearer of bad news but procrastination may hurt you more than you realize. For example, during a keynote address to college presidents, I asked, "Raise your hand if you think of yourself as a procrastinator." 15% did. I asked the same question of a large group of unemployed people. 90% raised their hand.

At the risk of sounding like your father, getting things done not only makes your life better but means you're living a more admirable life--you're contributing to those around you.

Think about how your lack of motivation has affected you, professionally and personally. Is it worth working on making yourself more motivated? If so, read on.

Counter your resistance to uncomfortability. It's tempting to think, "I'll put that task off until tomorrow--it may feel more comfortable then." Alas, that's too unlikely. Everyone, even people with great jobs find some of the work boring, frustrating, or difficult. Winners just accept that often, they must do things that are uncomfortable. Indeed, the willingness to do the uncomfortable may be a hallmark of a good person.

Too, remember that like the drug addict who, for a, short-term pleasure, ruins their life, the momentary comfort of deferring a task is far outweighed by the long-term discomfort you'll suffer if you're a procrastinator.

Counter your fear of failure. Ask yourself if, rationally, the rewards of trying the task are worth the risks--even if you were to fail, big-time. For example, let's say you'll finally make a

concerted effort to find Mr. Right but you pull out all the stops for three years and have nothing to show for it but tears. Wouldn't you still feel better for having tried? Won't your friends and family respect you more for having tried?

Give up or defer your perfectionism. If you demand your work be perfect, you may make tasks so odious that you procrastinate doing them. The perfect is the enemy of the good: Most tasks are wisely done to the 70-90%, not the 100% level because the benefits that derive from perfect work are usually, although not always, outweighed by the time and pain required.

And even if a task needs to be perfect, you might want to create whatever first draft you can create easily, even if it's just half as good as it needs to be. As a friend of mine says, "Write crap. Then revise." Why? Because it's far easier to revise your way to perfection than to come up with it out of thin air.

Counter your fear of success. Some people hate themselves and believe they don't deserve to succeed. Even assuming you're more flawed than most, making a difference is redemptive--you'll become more worthy of success.

Other people worry that if they succeed, their life will be harder: "I'll have to work more or on even harder tasks." Remind yourself that you can set limits. Even some CEOs say, "I'm having dinner with my family most nights."

If you do choose to take on a harder task, you might succeed at that, exceeding your self-expectations. And even if you fail, you can survive. Most successful people fail, dust themselves off, and move on to another, perhaps more appropriate challenge.

See yourself as a follow-through person. You're probably a long-time procrastinator so it's hard to picture yourself as something else. Sometimes, picturing yourself always getting started early and following through can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. That's not as airy-fairy as it sounds. Picturing yourself as that follow-through person replaces neurons that tell your brain, "I'm lazy," with neurons that say, "I'm a go-to guy/girl."

Do it the fun way. Sometimes, just asking yourself, "What's the most fun way I could do the task?" can be enough to get you to do it. For example, is there an easier way to get that report done? Should you listen to music while working? Exercise with a partner?

If you enjoy the adrenaline rush of trying to get it done last minute, alas there's less grade inflation in life than in school.

Here's how you might get that adrenaline rush while having enough time to do the project well: Start the project early but tell yourself things like, "Okay, I'm going to see if I can get this part done by 8:00." Or compete with a friend on who can, for example, make the most calls--the loser has to write a check to the other person's favorite charity.

Take a low-risk action. Beyond a modest amount, thinking leads to analysis paralysis and less done of quality and quantity. Normally, it's best to think just a bit and then take a low-risk action. You can always revise your game plan. A sailor will never get from California to Hawaii by pre-mapping the course. He must get started and continually readjust as conditions dictate. If she sees a hurricane ahead, she can turn back.

Don't wait until you feel more confident. The less you do, the less confident you'll feel. Take that low-risk action. That will probably increase your confidence.

Is your lack of motivation really depression? If you're depressed, it's hard to do much of anything. Recent evidence suggests that unless your depression is so serious, you can't get out of bed and/or are suicidal, anti-depressant drugs aren't worth taking--too often, they make too modest a difference relative to the side effects, or they stop working. The best

approaches to mild to moderate depression may be exercise, focusing on the positives of tasks and of your life, perhaps brief cognitive-behavioral therapy, and accepting that you'll have some periods in which your depression reduces how much you can accomplish.

Try cognitive-behavioral therapy and/or a drug for ADD?

Cognitive-behavioral therapy and/or ADD medication help some people get much more done. If you're wondering if that might be worth a trial, discuss it with a specialist. Here's a directory:

<http://www.chadd.org/Content/CHADD/Support/ProfessionalDirectory/default.htm>.

§ **Eliminate choice.** Don't make it a choice--Just make yourself sit down and do the task or a section of it. That seemingly simplistic Nike slogan "Just do It" works more often than you might think. If it might help, promise yourself a reward for completing the task. I often say, for example, "After I get X done, I'll take my dog, Einstein, for a walk."

§ **Do it for someone else.** Some people procrastinate on their own tasks but not on tasks for someone else. Would your child benefit from seeing you land a great job? Do it for him. Would your spouse be delighted you made those calls? Do it for

her. Would your parents be proud if you made that speech? Do it for them.

Picture the benefits and liabilities of accomplishing your goal.

If the liabilities outweigh, choose another goal. If it's a long-term project, you might try the seemingly superfluous but often effective technique of, thrice daily, saying aloud, with expression, the benefits of accomplishing the goal--it retrains your brain's neurons so those benefits stay top-of-mind.

§ **Build-in reminders.** It's easy to suppress thoughts of doing the dreaded task. To help you remember, write a word on your hand, schedule it on your calendar, whatever.

Be accountable to someone. Check in daily with a person and/or weekly with a group--maybe some of your friends. Try this structure: Each person gets 10 minutes in the hotseat to describe her or his goal, get input from the group on how to achieve it, and then commit to doing X by next week's meeting. The next week, each person reports on their progress. The fear of having to tell the group, "I procrastinated," is motivating. Also, you get practical ideas and emotional support from the group.

Take baby steps. That's old hat but it often works: Do a baby step, even if it's just to read one page. Then another baby step.

Before you know it, your inertia may give way to momentum and you'll get the task done. Don't know how to break the task into baby steps? Ask someone you respect.

Be conscious of The Moment of Truth. There's a moment, usually unconscious, when you decide whether to do the task or something more pleasurable. Make that decision consciously and, sure, sometimes you'll decide to go get a snack but you'll more often choose to do the task. That moment of truth is when you have to summon all your will, remember that your life will be better if you get the task done and worse if you don't, and just do the damn thing.

The One-Second Task. This is an extra-strength version of the baby-steps technique. One second is an unintimidating amount of time; you're least likely to procrastinate that. So when facing a task, no matter how big, ask yourself, "What's the first one-second task I need to do?" Maybe it's opening a computer file or picking up the phone. Fine. Do that one-second task. Then ask yourself, "What's my next one-second task?" Usually that starts the ball rolling--an object in motion tends to stay in motion.

Play shrink with yourself. Keep a memo pad with you and every time you're tempted to procrastinate, write the time and the thought or feeling that's making you want to procrastinate.

After a few days, review your notes for common threads. What would a shrink tell you? Often, just the act of writing your procrastinations makes you procrastinate less.

How would your twin get you unstuck? Pretend you have a wiser twin. Tell him your situation aloud. Reread all the techniques in this article. What would your twin say to get you motivated, unstuck?

Might any of the above matches light your fire? - See more [here](#).

Does Your Procrastination Really Need Curing?

Sometimes, like pain, procrastination is a warning that something's wrong. Just as pain when you touch a hot stove tells you to stay away, procrastination can be your brain saying, "Stay away from this activity!" When is your brain right? Take this test; write down your answers.

1. What are the benefits of NOT doing the activity you've been procrastinating?
2. What are the benefits of doing it?
3. What's the worst that could happen?
4. Could you survive?
5. How likely is that worst case?

Now look at what you've written and commit that--by a time you select--you'll either do the task or drop it forever.

Now stop reading this ebook and do something productive!

Like what you've read or want to learn more about Marty Nemko? - See more [here](#).