

I'll Do It... Tomorrow

DEAR M,

I know this sounds like everyone else out there but I procrastinate. Badly! In fact just writing this letter was a big chore (strangely I feel a bit better having written it). I think a lot about doing great things with my life and well; I don't get further than thinking about them. What's most upsetting is that I think about leaving my current position at work and doing something different - something that I feel excited about and that I would look forward to every day. I have been thinking about this for a very long time – years! Currently, my job involves moving piles of paper around and spending most of my time organising other people's projects. I want my own project and I want to be more creative. I read lots of self help books and whine to my closest friends (they are tired of hearing about what I want to do and haven't done; they give me lots of suggestions and I file them away). I am so unhappy. Why do I do this to myself? I'm really tired and I'm feeling stuck!

DEAR STUCKHEARTED,

It's not surprising that you are tired. **Procrastination is exhausting and stressful.** Stress is a fight, flight or freeze response which releases a flood of hormones, adrenaline and cortisol into your system. The more you procrastinate, the more stress you feel and the more stress you feel, the more you procrastinate. Stress can be exhausting especially when there is nothing to show for it! There is an alternative to living life with one foot stuck on the accelerator and the other stuck on the brake.

Stuck in a Negative Cycle

And the stuckness is frustrating and real. You are literally “stuck” in a negative cycle. Your habit of thinking without doing has become a fixed response. **Procrastinators “successfully” establish a whole set of habits that keep them locked into a negative pattern.** Due to experience you actually become more skilled at procrastinating than taking action and following through. Change is possible. You can and will feel more clarity and gain momentum. You will reduce your stress.

Big Goals – Big Avoidance

Take a moment to **objectively** look at what you do. Procrastinators tend to imagine gigantic goals that feel and in fact may be, impossible to reach. The dream or the goal is exciting in itself but the energy for it fizzles out quickly. It is reasonable to avoid doing anything that feels impossible, overwhelming and has no guarantee. **Hint: Are you willing to start something that feels possible and might not work out as planned?**

Marilyn Minden R.N. M.E.S. R.S.W.
Certified Gestalt Therapist in Toronto
www.marilynminden.com
mjminden@gmail.com
(416) 385-1557

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Hidden Needs

Being stuck can sometimes fulfill some hidden needs. When you procrastinate you successfully avoid judgement about the thing you want to do. Chronic procrastinators often carry unrealistically high expectations of themselves and others. And from an 'all or nothing' viewpoint the only options are a perfect or disastrous outcome. Where did that 'old' internal message come from? When you are fearful of failure or success, you unconsciously avoid taking action. The risk of making mistakes becomes too great. The effect is a kind of paralysis. Is that familiar?

The Paradox!

Contrary to common perception, procrastination is **not** about being lazy. It is usually about perfectionism, and feeling overwhelmed. Paradoxically, immobility is a way to reinforce feelings of failure – the very feelings you want to avoid.

Asking the \$\$\$\$\$\$ Question

Start by asking: **What's the worst that can happen if...?** And then answer that question and continue with more questions and answers until you get to the "bottom of it". Is it your fear of failure or success? Is it a fear of disappointment? Is it a fear of being judged? And ask if you can handle it? And ask what you want to do about it – if anything...

Dreaming Without Action – Oh the Heaviness of it all!

Procrastination is **dreaming without action**. When there is no **physical** aspect to moving toward your goal, there is no positive reinforcement. You dream big, you don't act on it; you dream big again, and you don't act on it. The dream gets bigger and you feel smaller.

Stuck in Overwhelm

When we are in 'overwhelm' mode we tend to feel heavy; we are not moving. It's

similar to a week without any exercise! Procrastinators mentally **skip** over the action details of getting to the goal and take this giant cognitive **leap** to the final outcome! Notice how far your mind can go while you are sitting still! Skipping, leaping and feeling stuck. It doesn't have to be this way...

Feeling Better:

The Action - Mood Connection

You said that you "felt a little better" when you wrote this letter; this is a good example of what action can do for you! You have begun to create a positive feedback loop. The aphorism, "taking one step at a time" is a physical action and one of the simplest antidotes to stuckness.

Externalise what you carry in your mind and if you want to, experiment with these steps to meet your resistance. **Notice any changes in your energy when you:**

Locate where you hold your procrastination in your body (yes, it is an unusual suggestion – try it.) Sit with the feeling for a few minutes and then breathe into that place.

Shout out what keeps you stuck Imagine you are standing alone at the top of a mountain and shouting it out to the universe!

Write a brief list of your 'inner critic's' messages. Take an inventory of any harsh and negative self judgements.

Write a companion list to the critic. What would your 'inner ally' say differently? How would your best friend encourage you?

Write in one sentence, or **tell** someone what's important to you about "having your own project".

Guidelines: Do this imperfectly!

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Should vs Want: How to get energized!

As a first step in changing your pattern, consider whether your dream/goal is a “should” or a “want”? Is it what others think you should do or what you really want to do?

“Shoulds” can drain energy as the motivation is not truly your own.

You don’t own the desire – it belongs to someone else.

A real “want” is energizing!

Be curious about your resistance, your opposition, your protest! Complete the following sentence: “I won’t do this because...”

Look in the mirror and **say** “I should do this!” And notice your level of energy.

Look again in the mirror and say: “I will do this when...” (Create 3 conditions in which you will take some initial steps toward your goal.) or “No!” I won’t do this now.”

Guidelines: Notice what your body feels when you change your language. Describe your thoughts and feelings.

How to “use” a Friend!

Invite a close friend to just listen while **you** ask and answer these six questions:

1. Who am I doing this for?
2. What difference would it make to my life?
3. What’s my first step?
4. What would be a ‘good enough’ start?
5. What would keep me going?
6. Who can help me with this?

Guidelines: Be rigorously honest, specific and realistic.

Externalise your Accountability - Choose a co-navigator as you pursue your goal

Procrastination is often a private struggle.

Let others know you are ready to accept their support that you are making a commitment to you – so it’s not just ‘talk’.

Set it up so that someone can ask you, “How is it going”? This will keep you ‘honest’ and help sustain your motivation and momentum.

Create a structure of weekly check-ins for guidance and encouragement.

Keep all your appointments whether you not you had a ‘good’ week.

Whatever you choose to do with your life, making a choice is progress. You will feel energized and in charge of you. Whether you proceed with a small, medium or big life changing event, your opposition may resurface. You may feel some heat because risk carries responsibility and expectation. Your response is part of growth and an opportunity to work your resilience ‘muscle’.

WARNING! When you get stuck and you do something different the following may occur:

Your negative stress will diminish; you will feel lighter, unapologetic, positive, bold, connected to your “inner ally” and more energetic!

Recommended Reading:

Procrastination:

Why you do it and what to do about it

By Jane B. Burka, Lenora M. Yuen

P.S.

REMOVE THE WORD

“LATER”

FROM THE COMMENT

“I’LL DO IT.”