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## **Don't put off dealing with your procrastination issues**

By SUSAN PINKER

**Dear Susan,**

I am a reasonably successful professional with a procrastination problem.

For example, I have been wanting to write this letter all year but am only getting to it now because the projects I've delayed are so past their due dates that they are getting to the point of no return.

I'd like some advice on how to deal with this before I start another year with the same bad habits.

--Past Due

**Dear Past Due,**

When I read about other members of the procrastination club, I get a little frisson of vindication.

Many days my accomplishments consist of returning a flood of e-mails and phone calls, attending what's supposed to be a brief meeting that hijacks two hours, and then tackling a half dozen finite tasks with short deadlines that get struck off my list with a little flourish.

Still, at the end of the day, one big important job -- the one with the elastic due date and the big pay-off -- has been shoved aside. It will get done when the deadline is staring me in the face.

I'm what the experts call an arousal procrastinator -- I accomplish things in the heat of the moment, often at the last moment.

And research shows that when it comes to white-collar workers, I have plenty of company.

According to Joseph Ferrari, a psychology professor and procrastination expert at DePaul University, 28 per cent of adults are chronic procrastinators.

About half of them are arousal procrastinators like me, who wait till the last minute and get a thrill-seeking rush. The other half are avoiders, who fear failure and success in equal measures.

(Among college students, more than 70 per cent students fit either description. Long deadlines and such short term temptations as campus beer bashes and laptop computer games contribute to the problem.)

It's a global phenomenon. Never mind the manana stereotypes -- the rate of procrastination is the same all over, Prof. Ferrari says, making slacking and dawdling some of the attributes that unify the species.

Of course, everyone chooses some tasks over others -- that's just prioritizing -- but when delaying is a lifestyle, when juggling items on your to-do list takes the place of crossing them off, then the problem is chronic, experts say.

White-collar types do it more than blue-collar workers, corporate folks more than professionals, and sales staff more than managers, says Prof. Ferrari, who has made a career out of tracking people who delay and defer.

Intelligence has nothing to do with it, nor does personality, Prof. Ferrari says, so it can't be predicted by those batteries of tests that recruiters love.

Paradoxically, though it's a trait that can be found at the higher echelons of achievement, that doesn't mean procrastinating superiors are more forgiving when they see the behaviour in others, Prof. Ferrari found.

One of his studies showed that the expectations held by procrastinating bosses of their put-it-off subordinates were just as exacting as the demands of their non-procrastinating colleagues.

"Should [procrastinating subordinates] be fired? Yes! Should they get less responsibility? Yes! If you're looking for sympathy, forget it," Prof. Ferrari said from his home office in Chicago.

So how do procrastinators get a leg up?

"Ignore e-mail" was the first bit of advice I got from the two experts I consulted -- who nonetheless responded briskly to my interview requests.

The other expert, Piers Steel, a business professor from the University of Calgary, shot back within 30 seconds, "There's no time like the present!"

Both said that the key to gaining uninterrupted hours for demanding tasks was to keep distractions at bay.

"Let's say you're trying to diet. And there's this magic spoon of ice cream on your desk and, every few moments, it chirps. Whenever you feel a moment of weakness, it's so close," Prof. Steel says.

The trick is to avoid having such temptation in front of you, he says, and instead to program in these distractions as rewards. Another piece of advice: Save responding to e-mail for your low-energy times when you should focus on easier tasks, rather than diving in first thing in the morning. Crossing the threshold of a new task is best when you're fresh. "You need uninterrupted time. The world is going to fight back," Prof. Steel says.

Along with breaking large tasks down into chunks you can manage, Prof. Steel also mentioned a concept called work hygiene, in which you keep your desk for work only, and schedule habitual work activities into your day, sticking to them as predetermined routines that are fairly immutable.

For example, you can pencil in blocks of time twice a week for a specific project, holding all calls and meetings during that time until that project is complete.

"Eventually the cues will build up. You will learn that once you're in the same place at the same time the cues will take over," he says.

But like an exercise regimen or a diet, changing behaviour is a long-term project and you won't see immediate results. Tools to help you stick to the regimen include Prof. Steel's website, <http://www.procrastinus.com>, on which he lists workbooks that can help you recast your irrational negative thoughts ("I'll never get it done," or "it won't be good enough") as well as track your accomplishments.

But the key, according to both experts, is try to create a world where you have to get things done well in advance and rewards are contingent on that happening.

"Go back to the days before e-mail and the drop-dead deadline," when projects had to be mailed three days in advance, says Prof. Ferrari, adding that companies should start offering incentives to early birds.

If companies dangled a half day off, money or parking privileges for early or timely submissions, they'd see results, he said.

"I'm not saying don't be flexible. I'm just saying, don't be spineless."

**Dear Susan,**

A handicapped person has just started to work in my office in a modified space built to accommodate her wheelchair. She often drops things and struggles with one of the doors. Should I help or would this be considered patronizing?

--Nervous Neil

**Dear Neil,**

Ask her. Just because she's in a wheelchair doesn't mean she's taken an oath of silence. And while you're at it, ask her if she wants to join you for lunch or coffee with other co-workers. People in new jobs often feel like outsiders. Being clued in to the social scene with some office history or harmless gossip opens doors, too.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.*

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