

Overcoming Procrastination (and Perfectionism)

Sometimes good enough really is better than perfect.

by Erin Wiley

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Photo courtesy of Erin Wiley

"I'll just check Facebook one last time ... then grab a snack ... and maybe call Mom really quick about next week's plans ... I'll throw a load of laundry in the washer ... send that one email I've been meaning to write ... I should really probably just quit and start tomorrow, my brain is so fried ..."

These are the thoughts that derail me from nearly every project I have that needs to get done, but that I don't

necessarily want to do. What is it with us procrastinators? Do we truthfully work better under pressure? Are we just lazy avoiders of work? Do we all have ADD? Many theories abound as to why people put things off. But there is one main symptom that seems to be at the heart of every tried and true procrastinator. Perfectionism.

I had a patient, we'll call him Mike, who was just days away from graduating with a bachelor's degree. He had struggled all semester with an English course he was taking, and now, with one day left, he was ready to throw in the towel.

"I sit in front of the computer for hours, scrutinizing every word I type. Was it a good choice? Is there a better choice? Then I search the thesaurus and think about it some more, then I get overwhelmed and finally realize I've been at it for five hours, and I don't even have one full page finished. I'm done!"

And he was serious. He had himself so worked up that he had decided to not finish the paper, not finish the class and would have to retake it and wait another semester before graduating. It was time for what we therapist's call a "paradoxical intervention." I suggested he write the most average paper he could, that day, and turn it in before the midnight deadline. It was 1 p.m. I told him to start his fingers typing and to not stop -- no looking back, no analyzing, just constant typing, his free flow thoughts going directly onto the paper regardless of the quality he perceived he was achieving. You see, in our super-hyper-competitive society, we are (or at least we believe we are) judged by the quality and/or quantity of your work. Your self-worth isn't inherent, it's directly tied to what you produce.

(Why do you think there are so many crazed parents out there nowadays? People's egos are even wrapped up in the quality of child they "produce"!)

With that kind of belief system, not doing our best at all times puts us in a position to be judged and found not "good enough." For most, that is the deep, underlying fear that motivates perfectionistic tendencies, which consequently lead to procrastination.

Set goals with deadlines ...

So, how do we overcome this hard-to-shake habit?

Breaking projects down into smaller bits helps. Getting overwhelmed at the size of a task leads many to complete shutdown. I used to play a game with my boys when they were little (and had what seemed like thousands of Legos on the floor to pick up): "Pick up 29 Legos and put them in the bin!" And they would. Then they'd run back to me. "Now... 17! Now 4! Now 40!" Pretty soon the floor was cleared, and the task they had originally protested as "too hard" was finished. Snap!

Be content with "good enough." Know when to walk away from your work. We often get so caught up in a project that we spend needless time fussing over details that will matter to no one but ourselves. Stop. Talk yourself down. Finish up and walk away. Be done.

Set goals with deadlines, so you will force yourself into completing a task by a certain date. Otherwise, as many of us know, we would drag out projects indefinitely. Get someone to hold you accountable if need be.

Talk yourself through the "what if" fears. What IF your boss thinks it's not your best work to date? What IF you are asked to redo a portion of a project because it needs tweaking? Tell yourself: "I WILL survive. It's all going to work out OK." (I talk myself down with that one all the time.)

Don't fear mistakes. Maybe even set out to make one or include one on your finished piece. You will free yourself up for a whole new project if you can let go of the fear of failure. You won't be the first, or last person, to show their humanity by making a mistake.

As for Mike, well, he went home and wrote a paper that earned him a "C." And he passed the class. He didn't graduate with a 4.0 like he had hoped, and ended up with a 3.85 instead. And guess what? His current employer didn't care about the .15 difference in his GPA one bit, and hired him anyway. "Good enough" WAS better than "perfect" in his story. I think you will find it will be in yours, too.

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