



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03XET  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
OCTOBER 04, 2017

## **ARTICLE** **MANAGING YOURSELF**

# 5 Research-Based Strategies for Overcoming Procrastination

*by Chris Bailey*

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# 5 Research-Based Strategies for Overcoming Procrastination

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Chances are that at this very moment you're procrastinating on something. Maybe you're even reading this article to do so.

A while back, I took a year to experiment with every piece of personal productivity advice I could find. In becoming hyperaware of how I spent my time, I noticed something: I procrastinated a lot more often than I had originally thought. In one time log I kept, I found that over the course of one

week, I spent six hours putting off tasks — and that’s just the procrastination that was apparent from my time log.

This got me thinking: why do we procrastinate, even though we know it’s against our best interests? How can we overcome it, preferably without hating ourselves or the techniques we use in the process?

To answer these questions, I spoke to researchers, and spent time digging through dozens of academic journal articles. The advice I gathered became the foundation for part of my book and, fortunately, I discovered that a lot of it works.

### **Why we procrastinate**

One of the first things I learned was that procrastination is a human condition. About 95% of people admit to putting off work, according to Piers Steel, author of *The Procrastination Equation*. And I’d argue the remaining 5% are lying.

As for the phenomenon of putting stuff off, it’s “a purely visceral, emotional reaction to something we don’t want to do,” says Tim Pychyl, author of *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle*. The more averse you find a task, the more likely you are to procrastinate.

In [his research](#), Pychyl identifies a set of seven triggers that make a task seem more averse. Bring to mind something you’re putting off right now — you’ll probably find that task has many, if not all, of the characteristics that Pychyl discovered makes a task procrastination-worthy:

- Boring
- Frustrating
- Difficult
- Ambiguous
- Unstructured
- Not intrinsically rewarding (i.e., you don’t find the process fun)
- Lacking in personal meaning

On a neurological level, procrastination is not the slightest bit logical — it’s the result of the emotional part of your brain, your limbic system, strong-arming the reasonable, rational part of your brain, your prefrontal cortex. The logical part of your brain surrenders the moment you choose Facebook over work, or decide to binge another episode of *House of Cards* when you get home.

But there’s a way you can give the logical side of your brain the upper hand. When you notice an approaching showdown between logic and emotion, [resist the impulse to procrastinate](#). Here are the best ways I’ve discovered in my research to do that.

**Reverse the procrastination triggers.** Consider which of Pychyl's seven procrastination triggers are set off by an activity you're dreading. Then try to think differently about the task, making the idea of completing it more attractive.

Take writing a quarterly report. If you find this boring, you can turn it into a game: see how many words you can crank out in a 20-minute time period. Or if you find a work task ambiguous and unstructured, create a workflow that lays out the exact steps you and your team should follow each month to get it done.

**Work within your resistance level.** When a task sets off procrastination triggers, we resist doing it. But just how resistant are we?

Let's say you have to wade through a dense piece of research for an upcoming project. To find your resistance level, consider the effort you commit to that task along a sliding scale. For example, could you focus on reading for an hour? No, that period of time still seems unpleasant. What about 30 minutes? Shorten the amount of time until you find a period with which you're no longer resistant to the task — and then do it.

**Do something — anything — to get started.** It's easier to keep going with a task after you've overcome the initial hump of starting it in the first place. That's because the tasks that induce procrastination are rarely as bad as we think. Getting started on something forces a subconscious reappraisal of that work, where we might find that the actual task sets off fewer triggers than we originally anticipated.

**Research suggests** that we remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than projects we've finished. It's like listening to a catchy song, only to have it unexpectedly cut off in the middle and then have it stuck in your head the rest of the day. Starting a task means you'll continue to process it — and this makes you more likely to resume the work later on.

**List the costs of procrastination.** This tactic works best when you're putting off larger tasks. While it's not worth spending 20 minutes listing the costs of not going for your evening run, listing the costs will significantly help for a task such as saving for retirement. Add to your list all the ways procrastinating on retirement saving could affect your social life, finances, stress, happiness, health, and so on.

It's also worth making a list of the things you put off personally and professionally, large and small, while calculating the costs of procrastination for each.

**Disconnect.** Our devices offer a cornucopia of distractions, whether it's email, social media, or texting with friends and family. This is especially difficult as our work becomes more ambiguous and unstructured (two triggers of procrastination).

When you notice yourself using your device to procrastinate, disconnect. Sometimes when I'm writing, I go as far as to put my phone in another room, and shut off the WiFi on my computer. Other times, I turn to an app like [Freedom](#) or [Self Control](#), which blocks access to distracting sites, and require me to physically restart my computer to restore access.

This may sound drastic, and it is. Disabling digital distractions ahead of time gives you no choice but to work on what's really important.

There are proven ways to combat procrastination so that it doesn't get in the way of accomplishing your most important tasks. The next time you resist a task, consider whether it sets off any of the procrastination triggers, work within your resistance level, force yourself to get started on it, list the costs of putting the task off, or disconnect from the internet.

If you're anything like me, you'll find yourself procrastinating a lot less often.

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