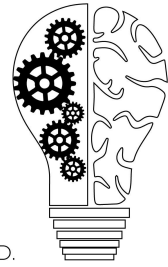


## Episode 022: The Psychology of Procrastination

Jackson Brammer, M.D., David Puder, M.D.



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**PSYCHIATRY &  
PSYCHOTHERAPY**

This PDF is a supplement to the podcast “Psychiatry & Psychotherapy” found on [iTunes](#), [Google Play](#), [Stitcher](#), [Overcast](#), [PlayerFM](#), [PodBean](#), [TuneIn](#), [Podtail](#), [Blubrry](#), [Podfanatic](#)

There are no conflicts of interest for this episode.

*My podcast guest this week, Dr. Jackson Brammer, says he used to be an expert procrastinator.*

*But after some research into why people procrastinate, he found a few tricks and tips to help him on his journey to live a more balanced life.*

*Dr. Brammer started this path by investigating Impostor Syndrome. Impostor Syndrome involves feeling like you're not the person people think you are—as if you're deceiving everyone. People with Imposter Syndrome believe if someone knew the real them, they would never receive the same level of trust or responsibility.*

*People who deal with Impostor Syndrome take negative statements and magnify them, adding them to the pile of proof that they aren't as capable as people believe them to be.*

*For Dr. Brammer, Imposter Syndrome came from his ability to excel in school, despite consistently cramming for assignments and tests. He felt that someday he would be “caught” and everyone would know that he had “faked” competence.*

*Recognizing this link led to the revelation that fighting procrastination might help him stop feeling like he didn't deserve to be in his position.*

## What is Procrastination?

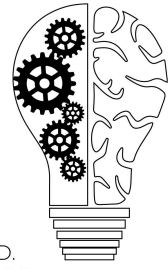
[Procrastination](#) is the act of avoiding something through delay or postponement.

You might be procrastinating when:

- There is a gap between your intention and action
- You feel like avoiding something

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- You find yourself easily distracted
- You feel overwhelmed by tasks at the last minute
- You always feel rushed to complete a project
- You're hesitant to truthfully update someone on your progress

It usually brings about feelings of:

- Shame
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Regret
- Anger
- Inauthenticity

## **Why do we Procrastinate?**

We procrastinate because our brains receive a reward for avoidance. Avoidance brings immediate relief from the distress associated with the task. Although we may experience discomfort in the final moments before a task is due, we rarely think about the past or future when procrastinating.

This creates a problematic cycle, one that erodes at our self-confidence. It also causes us to keep up a steady stream of “I should be...” in our subconscious minds.

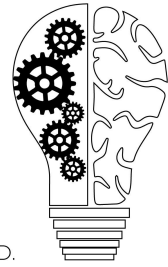
## **The Ingredients for Procrastination**

### **Personal Factors of Procrastination**

There are fixed factors related to procrastination, things that are innate to each of our different psychological experiences. For example, someone with ADHD is more likely to procrastinate.

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### **The fixed personal factors are:**

- Higher Impulsivity
- Lower [conscientiousness](#)—lower drive to be organized and accomplish.
- Limited attention-span
- Boredom / Low Interest - Interest can be considered an emotion with motivational properties related to approach

There are also variable factors—things like our environment, our health that day, and other things that might affect our tendency to procrastinate.

### **The variable personal factors are:**

- Willpower

Willpower is like a muscle. It can become tired, temporarily, after extensive use. However, we can strengthen our willpower through routine exercise. Try to place your willpower-hungry tasks at the beginning of the day. Also, take up some form of regular willpower exercise.

- Distress tolerance
- Willingness to ask for help

Being unwilling to ask for help can relate to Impostor Syndrome, and can fuel procrastination. It is often based in the lie that we “should” be able to complete something without assistance.

- Task-focused vs value-focused
- Self-consciousness & anxiety

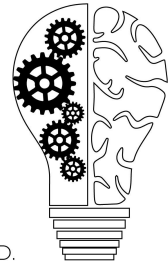
A common but counter-intuitive driver of procrastination is fear of failure. We protect the self temporarily by avoiding the task that threatens it.

### **The variable task or system-based factors are:**

- Unclear goals & expectations

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This can become paralyzing, especially when we are unwilling to ask for help. Procrastinators may find themselves unable to start something because they don't know how to start, but they don't want to show "weakness" by needing to ask for clarification.

- Unrealistic goals & expectations

Can lead to thoughts such as "I might as well not even try."

- Distractions

Distractions from electronic notifications and office visitors can contribute significantly to our tendency to avoid.

- Lack of accountability or mentors

Procrastination thrives in secrecy and isolation.

### **How do we procrastinate?**

As we build a habit of procrastinating, we develop false beliefs that worsen the habit.

#### **"I work better under pressure."**

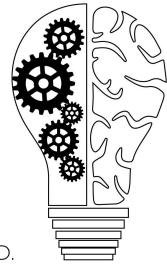
This is simply not true. It would be more accurate to say, "I work under pressure." The adrenaline spike and stress of the situation make us think we are better off waiting, but in reality it's unlikely that our delay will make the final product any better.

#### **"I'll feel more like it later."**

We deceive ourselves into thinking that we'll feel like completing the task later. We think we'll drink caffeine, get a mental boost, or find the "perfect time" to do the task, but it never comes.

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### **“I did pretty well, considering I waited until the last minute.”**

This is a self-protective belief. If we don't try and we fail, there is less reflection on the self than if we try our hardest and fail. We won't discover our true potential if we don't give ourselves ample time.

### **“I have plenty of time, I'll do it later.”**

We are undervaluing the future self when we think this way. Humans are terrible at predicting the future. We often don't start the project early enough to know how much time we'll actually need.

### **“I've planned and organized how I will complete the task, it's time for a break!”**

Planning more than only the first step can be its own form of procrastination. Sometimes doing “good” for awhile gives us permission to do “bad.”

### **“This is stupid, I don't even care about it.”**

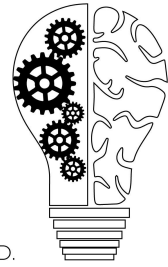
Our fear and insecurities can lead to us devalue the entire project altogether. If you talk yourself into believing you don't care about it, it won't hurt as much if you fail. This is another self-protective belief.

### **“There must be some way I can just not do this.”**

There isn't an easy fix for procrastination—we usually still have to complete the task.

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# **How do we Stop Procrastinating?**

## **Admit it**

To even begin to change, we have to become aware of the problem, then accept it. Once we accept it, we can often find the courage to change our patterns.

## **Catch the cognitive distortions**

If you want to pursue therapy for your procrastination, cognitive behavioral therapy can help. More specifically, cognitive behavioral therapy will help you identify your cognitive distortions. The second [episode](#) of the Psychiatry and Psychotherapy podcast deals with cognitive distortions.

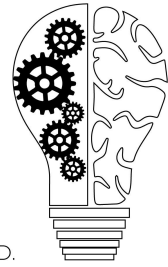
Go through the list of false beliefs we listed and journal your common cognitive distortions.

## **Here's the quick breakdown of how you can look at your thinking patterns when you decide to procrastinate:**

1. Recognize when you have the emotion about the task you want to delay. Sometimes the emotion will disguise itself as a physical sensation, such as anxiousness, nausea, or a rapid heartbeat.
2. Look at the thoughts that come with that emotion. Such as, "This is stupid, I don't even care about it."
3. Look at the cognitive distortions that came with the thought. Is the task actually "stupid," or is it something you should do, you're just afraid to do it, so you're demeaning it in case you fail? Be honest with yourself in your answer.
4. Repeat. This can help you rebuild a habit of identifying the things we tell ourselves and have always accepted as truth.

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### **Build your willpower**

- Tackle the high-willpower tasks earlier in the day. Earlier in the morning, when your cortisol is high, when your brain is fresh, you'll be able to take on the tasks you'll need to be highly motivated for.
- Start strength training, or another disciplined physical task. I've found that with strength training, even if I don't want to begin, and even if the whole workout is miserable, it teaches me that I can will my body to do what the program requires. This is good for willpower training. Another will power builder is to choose a difficult book, decide to read it in let us say 60 days, and then divide the book up into 60 parts to read every day. I often recommend this to psychiatry residents and NPs I train, challenging them to read 3 books in 60 days using this method.

### **Forgive yourself**

Practice self-forgiveness when you identify the pattern. We are both aware that we feel frustrated with ourselves when we know we've been procrastinating. That frustration is a sign we are trying to change, but it isn't helpful in the actual change. It can lead to sadness and a lack of self confidence, which can worsen the pattern of procrastination because negative emotions lead to avoidance.

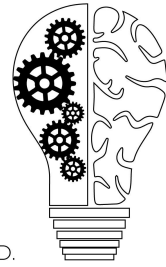
Self-forgiveness reduces the negative emotions we associate with a task, thus reducing future avoidance and offering ourselves an encouraging approach instead.

How can you practice self-forgiveness?

1. Identify the emotions you feel that are associated with past tasks you haven't completed.
2. Identify the emotions behind tasks you felt you didn't excel in, or that didn't turn out the way you wanted them to when you did complete them.
3. Accept the emotion that is there, have self compassion and forgiveness for the emotional experience you had.

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### Practice Mindfulness

**Mindfulness** is another way to help fix procrastination. Mindfulness will help you be able to identify mental patterns, such as cognitive distortions. When we pay attention to ourselves through the gentle observation of mindfulness, we aren't striving to "fix" or self-judge. Since becoming aware of the problem is one of the first ways we are able to change, mindfulness helps us be more aware of our actions in general. It can also serve as a form of willpower training.

Download a good meditation, or use the app [Headspace](#), and practice it daily to develop a habit of mindfulness.

### Define and focus on your values

One of the most important things you can do is align your tasks and goals to your values. This automatically undercuts any excuses you'll have because ultimately, the task, if you've signed up for it, aligns with your values.

For example, if there's a task associated with your job that you don't want to do, you can still link it with something you believe in. Bottom line is that we value patient care, so even we don't necessarily feel like doing small tasks throughout the day, we still do them because we link them to our deeper values.

### Define your goals

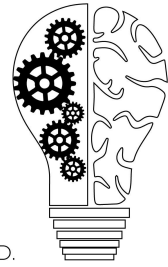
It will also help to be able to clarify your goals—daily, weekly, monthly. Make those goals realistic so you don't talk yourself out of them. Then, merely focus on starting the tasks, not completing them.

Make the goals small and manageable, and focus only on what the very next step should be. In this way, you're setting yourself up for positive reinforcement, instead of the negative thoughts that usually accompany procrastination. Avoid over-planning as a form of procrastination.



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### **Psych yourself up for the task**

Sometimes we need more encouragement to complete a task we are dreading. It's why people have workout playlists. You can use the same psychology behind that to prepare for even daily tasks. Get a pour-over, trendy coffee, plan a reward for when you complete the task, figure out what makes you want to follow through, and do it.

Since using all of these tools to beat his habit of procrastination, Dr. Brammer has been able to add more things to his life, and is still able to accomplish it all and feel confident. He's happily married, a father of two, involved in his church, in a band, and is a practicing psychiatrist.

Have you ever dealt with procrastination? What do you find your cognitive distortions are—what are the things you tell yourself to make yourself feel better about putting things off?

For further reading on procrastination, check out some of [Timothy Pychyl's](#) research.