

I'll do it another time

There's a science behind procrastination and how it can affect our health

"I'll clean the house later."

"I'll fill up the car with gas tomorrow morning."

"Thinking about putting together a will stresses me out. I'll deal with it later."

At one time or another, we've all put something off. It may be large or small. It may be put off for five minutes or a year. Whatever the case, procrastination is a part of life. But what's important is understanding why we procrastinate and how not to let it get out of hand to the point it affects our mental health.

The basics

[Ari Lakritz](#), PsyD, a clinical psychologist at OSF HealthCare, defines procrastination as wanting to do an important task but pushing it off or finding something else to do.

"Despite my best efforts, I just can't help myself," Dr. Lakritz says, putting himself in the mind of a procrastinator.

Just like stress activates parts of the brain that control fear and anger, procrastination comes with a sense of relief in the brain, Dr. Lakritz explains.

"All those aversive stimuli in the brain settle and go back to their baseline. Then it's smooth sailing until at least the next time the issue comes up," Dr. Lakritz says.

Procrastination is often equated with being able to prioritize and work well under pressure. Don't confuse the two, Dr. Lakritz warns.

"Procrastination is accompanied by a sense of shame," he says. "A sense of 'I know deep down what I'm doing is not the most productive way of working. It's not the most responsible way of working'."

For example, take a college student who can type an A+ essay right before the midnight deadline. A provider like Dr. Lakritz may not call them a procrastinator because working at the deadline is part of their plan. They know they are going to finish the task. There's no opposing force.

The why and the consequences

So why do we put things off?

Dr. Lakritz says for many, it's about how our brain interprets scenarios. If you pass a coworker in the hallway and they don't greet you, you may think the person is mad at you. In reality though, the coworker was just lost in their own thought. But your brain doesn't interpret that.

The same concept applies for procrastinators. And for people with attention deficit disorder, anxiety and depression, it may be worse.

"They're not so good at understanding or feeling the consequences of what's going to happen when they come to that big meeting or big test unprepared," Dr. Lakritz says.

Ironically, those people may be on the other end of the pendulum – too optimistic or confident about what they can accomplish. They lack an understanding of time. They think they can bake a cake in five minutes, for example, when we know it takes longer, no matter your recipe or skill level.

The consequences of procrastination vary by person, but it comes down to missed opportunities and not living up to your potential. For a teenager, putting off homework might lead to missing the work altogether. That means poor grades and fewer chances at the higher education they want. For adults, procrastination may mean missed opportunities to advance up the corporate ladder. And it keeps spiraling from there.

Treatment

Dr. Lakritz says a mental health provider shouldn't judge how a person organizes tasks or, in general, lives their life. But he says there are some evidence-backed ways to tackle severe procrastination.

- Find the amount of time you can work without distraction. If it's 15 minutes, break your project up into small, manageable chunks of around 15 minutes.

"Take a nice little break to revitalize yourself between those small chunks, then get right back at it," Dr. Lakritz suggests. "You might spend more time overall on this task, but you'll be working much more consistently.

"With procrastination, slow and steady wins the race."

- Rewards like food or music can work, but Dr. Lakritz suggests pairing them *with* productive work, not after. A work buddy can help here.

"Come up with a contract or rule. You're only allowed to eat that ice cream or candy bar when you're working actively," Dr. Lakritz says. "You'll begin to associate working with something physically pleasurable. We would expect that to have pretty good effects on your level of motivation going forward."

Learn more

Learn more about behavioral and mental health resources on the [OSF HealthCare website](#). Just do it today and not tomorrow.