

Bottom Line

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SECRETS®

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How to Beat Procrastination... in a Minute or Less

Jeff Davidson

Breathing Space Institute

Everyone procrastinates about some things, and most of us have areas in our lives where we don't procrastinate at all. But for millions of us, procrastination is a serious obstacle to performance.

Studies of employees at corporations suggest that employees may engage in actual work for less than five hours a day. The rest of the time is spent *preparing* to work, but not actually doing it. One study found that about 90% of participants procrastinate on occasion, and about 25% chronically put things off.

It's getting worse. People today are flooded with information -- news, E-mails, instant messaging, Internet databases, etc. The constant flow of information means that more matters compete for attention at any given time. It's easier than ever to put things off until a later date or, in some cases, not do them at all.

WHAT YOU ARE VS. WHAT YOU DO

Even though procrastinators tend to have deep-seated traits in common, such as fear of failure or the urge for perfection, the tendency to put things off is mainly due to habits -- and habits can be changed.

As a management consultant, I have spent decades helping individuals, small businesses and corporations manage their time more efficiently. My experience shows that among the hundreds of popular tricks for beating procrastination, there are only a few that really work. Most of these

techniques can be put into practice in one minute or less. *Among the best...*

SET SPECIFIC GOALS

Many people don't really make a distinction between their priorities and their goals. That's a mistake -- you need both to work efficiently.

Priorities are big-picture intentions. They are things you want to achieve at some point, such as becoming healthier or getting a promotion. Priorities tell you where you want to go, but don't provide a roadmap for getting there.

People who focus only on priorities don't get a lot done because they don't have specific action plans to follow. For that, you need goals.

Goals support priorities. They're specific ways to accomplish what's important to you.

Example: Suppose that your priority is to "be healthy." There's not much you can do to achieve that on any given day. What you *can* achieve are specific goals that make the priority possible. "I'll get to the gym on Wednesday for a 40-minute workout." This is a good goal because it's both specific and includes a time line for completion.

Another example: Maybe you're stuck in middle management and want to take the next step up the corporate ladder. This is the type of priority that will probably require dozens of individual goals to achieve. You might decide, for example, to take one university management class each semester... make an appointment to tell your boss that you're willing to take extra assignments... or introduce yourself to key players in other departments in the next two days.

AVOID INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Do you try to collect every available piece of information before making a decision? Since there's always more to know, you may find yourself procrastinating -- and missing opportunities.

Solution: Trust your instincts. This isn't the same as acting on a whim. It means collecting enough information to make an informed decision, while at the same time trusting the knowledge and information that you've accumulated over the years. One study looked at the use of information in making decisions. Two groups at a company were asked to buy a large piece of equipment. Participants in one group were given large amounts of data -- analysis, articles, spec sheets. Those in a second group had to decide with very little data. After the equipment had been bought and installed, both groups reviewed their decisions. Surprisingly, the group that had based its decision more on general knowledge and instinct than on data was as satisfied, if not more so, with its decision.

DON'T WAIT TO BE IN THE MOOD

Can you imagine a pilot saying, "I'm not in the mood to land the plane,"

or a heavyweight contender saying, "I'm not in the mood to fight tonight"? You hear this kind of thing all the time from procrastinators.

The brutal truth: Most successful people produce on schedule, regardless of how they happen to be feeling. The reality of today's competitive world is that there isn't time (or money) to postpone projects until someone happens to feel like doing them.

Helpful: Start projects even when you aren't feeling particularly energized or creative. Force yourself to do something -- anything. Most people find that they get "in the mood" once the work is under way, even when they didn't feel that way initially.

PREVIEW INFORMATION

Suppose it's late Friday, and you know you have to tackle a project the following Monday -- and you're dreading it.

Try this: Preview the information beforehand. Flip through files or brochures. Start a rough outline of what you're going to do and some of the issues you need to think about. Glance at a few articles. Then put it all away, and don't look at it again during the weekend.

Previewing material allows the subconscious mind to start preparing... generating ideas... and letting plans take root. When it's time to actually start the project on Monday, you'll already be familiar with the material, which results in less anxiety -- and less need to procrastinate.

TRY THE THREE-TO-FIVE METHOD

This approach was pioneered by time management guru Alan Lakein. When you're launching a new project, identify three to five elements that you can complete quickly and easily -- and get an immediate "win."

Suppose you've been putting off a task at home -- say, raking the leaves. Identify three to five "mini-jobs" that have to be done -- getting plastic bags ready... finding the rake... getting your work gloves out of the garage, etc.

Every task has multiple entry points. Don't start with the hardest parts first. Start with something easy. Once you get going, the rest of the project will fall into place more easily.

Helpful: Set short time limits initially. Pick an entry point that will only take, say, four minutes. Short projects are mentally easier to start -- and most people just keep going without watching the clock.

PROCRASTINATE CREATIVELY

If you're not ready to launch into a big project, don't just dawdle. Fill the time by completing easier tasks not directly related to the project that will eventually need attention.

Example: Rather than immediately trying to decipher complicated forms at tax time, take care of unpaid bills, file medical insurance forms, answer correspondence, etc. These "warm-up" tasks have to be done -- and doing them initially is like a mental stretching exercise that creates a state of preparedness for the larger, more complicated job to come.

PLOT A COURSE

It's easy to procrastinate when you lack either a clear starting point or a logical set of steps to take. A lack of direction produces much of the anxiety that precedes starting any project.

Helpful: Jot down the main steps that the project requires. (You'll probably add or subtract steps along the way.) Scratch out each step as you're done, so you can track your progress.

Even if you're one of those people who can map things out mentally, writing down individual steps "decongests the brain" and allows you to focus your mental energy on the individual steps, rather than worrying about the entire process. Suddenly, a daunting task looks smaller and easier.

Bottom Line/Retirement interviewed Jeff Davidson, founder and president, Breathing Space Institute, a time- and efficiency-management consulting firm in Chapel Hill, North Carolina (www.breathingspace.com). He is author of [*The 60 Second Procrastinator*](#) (Adams Media) and [*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Your Time*](#) (Alpha).