Working with students that procrastinate

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Procrastination in an academic environment

An eclectic approach
Procrastination

In what subject would you earn a degree on procrastination?
A complex problem needs a variety of tools. My Inspiration toolbox

- NLP
  - Do what works - logical levels
- Mindset interventions: Carol Dweck
- Solution focused therapy
- MBCT

Procrastination

‘Is the gap between intention and action.’
(Professor Tim Pychyl)
Future Homer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQvvmT3ab80

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mS9LCR5P5wl

Procrastination is about feeling good right now

According to professor Tim Pychyl procrastination is

• the gap between intention and action
• cross-cultural: 20 % of the people procrastinate problematic, but 95 % of the students report it.
• about feeling good right now - Powerful because it’s negative reinforcement
• In september procrastinators feel better than non-procrastinators, but later in the academic year it flips: non-procrastinators are more happy and a lot healthier.
It seems fun ... but it’s not

Causes a lot of suffering.

Relations under pressure (break-ups)
Spend less time with people you love
Daily unnecessary stress
Not reaching goals

Paralising guilt, depression, anxiety and underachievement, negative self image

If you live a life according to your values, is there one day that you don’t have to do something you don’t like to do?

Anne-Marie Desmet - Student Support Services - Stuwo LUCA

Understanding students who procrastinate

Anne-Marie Desmet - Student Support Services - Stuwo LUCA
Research on Procrastination

**Cause of procrastination**

- Fear of failure & perfectionism
- Self-regulation failure: lack of discipline and agency

**Function of procrastination**

- **Temporary** reduction of stress and anxiety
- Psychodynamic: dealing with internal conflicts
- Ego-protection: avoiding negative evaluation

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**Procrastination-avatars**

**Avatar 1**
‘Allwillbefine’

- Lack of discipline and vigor
- Dreamer
  - I don’t see the problem
- Great plans, big stories
  - I have all the time that I need

**Avatar 2**
‘Lookatwhatido!’

- Externally oriented
- Fear of being judged
- Perfectionist
  - I have to excel!
- Overworker; Can’t say no.
  - No priorities. Sociable self-handicapping

**Avatar 3**
‘Idoitmyway’
‘Iworkbestunderpressure’

- Struggle for power/autonomy
- Challenger
  - Looks for control: ‘every appeal is a threat to my individuality’
- Overt [rebel]/Hidden or unconscious [says yes, does no]  
  - Adrenaline seeker: active, struggles with time, afraid of boredom
  - Setting up limits between me & other

**Avatar 4**
‘Tellmewhattodo’

- Fear of separation & individualisation
- Ruminator
- Lack of confidence, afraid to grow, fear of change
- Unfused individuation
  - ‘I stop to exist if I’m not with the others.
    - Dependent of advice, stay number 2, create crisis out of dependency
  - Hide behind your tasks, & you’re never alone.
4 types of procrastination

Fear of being judged perfectionist/overworker
"Look what I did!"

Lack of discipline & vigor
"All will be fine"

Struggle for power
Challenger
adrenaline-seeker
"I do it my way, I only work under pressure"

Fear of individuation
Ruminator, emerging with other unclear decisions
"Tell me what to do"

Sapadin, L. and Maguire, J., “It’s about time!: the six styles of procrastination and how to overcome them”, Penguin Books, New York, 1997


Determining Factors

1. Personality Traits
2. Development: Identity achievement
3. Emotional intelligence
1. Personality traits and procrastination

- Protective: Conscientiousness
- Sensitive to procrastination:
  - Impulsiveness
  - Perfectionism - if not self-oriented but socially prescribed
2. Procrastination is developmental: adolescence and identity-achievement

Pre-frontal part of the brain develops till 24.
Identity achieved → more sense of agency
= ego-executive (direction) + ego synthetic (meaning) functions
Moratorium: take your time but explore!

3. Development:
Identity-achievement and procrastination

Forclosure: Look at the fields I choose the profession my parents like me to
Identity achievement: I found what I really like to study
Identity diffusion: After/Befor identitytypology no clearcutting present "I don't think this is it"
Moratorium: I'm working and travelling to find out what I really want
exploration
Conclusion:

• Problematic procrastination is caused by fear of failure and external orientation. Students that are externally orientated, want to please. They need a lot of confirmation from the outside world.

• To protect themselves for failure, they start procrastinating. This helps them to believe that if they hadn’t been procrastinating, they would have been able to do the job in a perfect way. Or they are so active on different fields that they protect themselves for failure: ‘I had no time’. We call this the ‘lookatwhatido’ procrastinators

• Another cause is lack of disciplin, what we can link to personality traits. We could call them the ‘allwillbefine’ procrastinators

• Autonomy and individuation is also important; procrastinating can be a rebellious act, overt or often hidden. These people are the ‘idoitmywaypeople’ or the ‘icanonlyworkunderpressure people’. It can be a way to define or differentiate yourself, to draw a line between me and the other.

• Fear of individuation: People that tend to merge with their environment (identitydiffusion) also procrastinate. This helps them to hide themselves, they stay dependant

• Adolescence plays a big part in all this: people that don’t yet form an identity of their own protect themselves for failure by procrastinating. They also do not have the inner value-driven energy that helps people to perform.
1. Challenge the narrative

The students present themselves with a narrative

- I am a procrastinator
- I am a perfectionist
- I work only under pressure
- I suffer a lot
- I feel powerless
- I make my parents unhappy
- My parents sent me here - they think there’s a problem...
‘I am a procrastinator’

If you follow the narrative, this could be what you get

Is it procrastination?

- Perfectionism
  - Task avoidance
  - Monitor & accept emotions.
- Lack of discipline/ego
  - Make scripts of desired future and of feared future
  - Make a mess: Imagine how it will feel if you do the job right
  - Confrontation!
  - Monitor and accept your emotions.
- Powergame
  - Become aware of the conflict and communicate about it
  - Monitor and accept your emotions.
- Fear of individuation
  - Tell me what to do
  - Bring your attention to the concrete job!
  - Monitor and accept your emotions.
Is it procrastination?

Or is it something else?

• Being demotivated
• Choice of subject or studyfield, Quit or continue studies
• Time-management or planning issues
• Burn-out, Depression, OCD and other psychiatric disorders
• Not wanting to graduate because graduation will put the student in a difficult position
  • Ex: Forced marriage.
  • Fear of becoming more independant
  • Poverty, or social problems that put pressure on ‘leaving-home’
  • Loyalty issues: Being the only person in the family that can study

Is it not procrastination? Identify & recognize the other problem.

Delay can be rational behaviour that suits peoples priorities and values.
Ex: multiproblem families

Motivation dips
Or bad study choices

Are you happy (enough) with your choices?
Define your priorities in subject choices
Identity achievement: explore what you really want.

Find solutions: Ask help.
Cut down activities
Explicit your priorities

Consult study coaches

Time-management or planning issues

Graduation causes new problems
Ex: forced marriages or unwanted changes

Find help with experts on the field – who can help you to solve your problem?
Tool 1:
Differentiate delay from procrastination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My delay (and that’s ok)</th>
<th>My procrastination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This behaviour serves MY values.</td>
<td>What makes me feel good now, but bad afterwards?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose to behave like this because...</td>
<td>‘I don’t envy the future me!’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep in mind: Ask the right questions

1. Determine what is procrastination & what isn’t.
2. Look for exceptions on procrastination.
3. Compliment indirectly.
4. Stop the identification with procrastination.
   - Search existing positive identifications
   - Look for change in behaviour or environment
   - Never underestimate ‘the smallest possible change’:
   - Don’t look for big changes, look for the sparkle that starts the engine
Tool 2: The behavior quadrant of Michael Hjerth.

1. Look at 1: What did you list?
2. Score how hard this is.
3. Start with the simplest task
4. Think: what could the effect be?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I DON'T LIKE TO DO IT NOW</th>
<th>BEHAVIOUR THAT FEELS GOOD NOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I WILL BE HAPPY HAVING DONE THAT</td>
<td>IS NO FUN! DEMANDS PERSEVERANCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS EASY FEELS GOOD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I WILL REGRET HAVING DONE THAT</td>
<td>IS NO FUN! OFTEN IT IS SOMETHING YOU'RE FORCED TO DO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IS FUN NOW</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep in mind:
The effect of procrastination on selfconfidence.

1. The power of wanting to ‘feel good now’ wins
2. Feeling insecure, guilty, worthless because of the procrastination
3. Confrontation with situation becomes more and more difficult
4. Circle of guilt and shame, social anxiety
5. Denial, feelings of worthlessness, losing contact with the own strengths.
6. The coping-strategie is avoidance, the harder the fight, the more people feel powerless.

Don’t fight, work slowly towards change!
Keep in mind:
Be the Sherlock Holmes of success experiences:

Good questions and ‘small talk’ restore selfimage

Be a detective, secretly in search of talents and successes.
Look everywhere! Hobby’s, previous positive experiences, accomplishments in the family.
Validate by generalizing this.
Keep schtum - ask any question that provokes a selfcompliment or an intention
Mumble: good that you come NOW
Look for the exceptions of procrastination.
Don’t say: I told you you can do it.

Keep in mind:
Don’t be an ally of the internal critical voice

The internal critical voice is the ‘solution’ that aggravates the problem. It works like putting out a fire with gasoline.
The final effect is stagnation.
The punishing internal critical voice

- sets unrealistic goals
- destroys selfconfidence
- Leads to panic and pathology
- Looks for solutions in the wrong place
2. Work on identity achievement

To strengthen self-image, focus on positive identity.
For change, focus on behaviour.

Working on identity achievement is bringing people in touch with their values.
Logical levels (NLP): Who do I want to be?

1. Environment
   What is the smallest possible change ...
   1. ... in your environment to help you do the job?

2. Behaviour
   2. ... in how much you work & how efficiently you work? How do you prioritize?

3. Capability (thoughts & feelings)
   3. ... in your emotional state that helps you to deal with unwanted feelings & thoughts?

4. Beliefs and values
   4. ... in your beliefs – how do you look at learning and what would you like to change about that?

   Values: what is a life full of meaning for you? What is the smallest thing you can do to come a little bit closer to that?

5. Identity
   5. If this works, what does that change in how you feel about yourself?

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Tool 4: Big dreams need small changes
Set up a goal structure

- Improve Your Habits
- Your Social Life in the Future
- Your Leisure Activity in the Future
- Your Family Life in the Future
- Your Career in the Future
- Qualities You Admire
- The Ideal Future
- A Future to Avoid

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoA4017M7WU

Do not open the door!

- Do not identify with procrastination
- Look for the smallest possible change on the level of environment or behaviour.
- Jordan peters about not opening the door:
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm_2zmX6AkC

What people think and believe:
Challenge verbal rules that cause problems

- To work a lot of hours means that you are motivated, willing and greatful for the opportunity you get.
- Suffering while studying means that a person is willing, perseverant, and respectful towards the school and instancies that pay the study.
- If it doesn’t go so well, you have to try harder.
- First you have to believe in yourself, then it will work.
- Perfectionists are superior people.
- Perfectionists don’t start from an incomplete idea.
- If you have to work hard, it means you are not that intelligent.
- First you have to gain willpower, then you will stop procrastinating.
- Try to feel better, then you will find the energy to work.
- People who only do the things that they can do perfectly, are to be admired.
Tool 5: Challenge non helping beliefs

The Yerkes-Dodson Law illustrates the relationship between pressure and performance. It explains how to find the optimum level of positive pressure at which people perform at their best. Too much or too little pressure can lead to decreased performance.

Tool 6: Challenge non helping beliefs

- Studies are ‘too’ important
- Previous experiences with failure
  - Fixed mindset
    - ‘I must prove that I am smart.’
  - Previous performances
    - Bad luck, illness, bad choices...
  - Ineffective advise by parents
  - perfectionism
  - ...

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Keep in mind:
Difficult task needs more self-care

- Something went wrong
- Self-confidence decreases, stress level: high, concentration: low.
- Procrastination is a short-term way to calm down but in the long run, it increases arousal and leads to more procrastination.
- The more a task is difficult, the more self-care is important!

Tool 7: Challenge the target shift:
The function of panic and suffering.

The shift from working to suffering
To suffer becomes ‘language’ for ‘I take this seriously, I do my best’
Target shift
The goal changes

From working to suffering
Suffering is ultimate proof of my motivation
I study all the details but not the essence, I start all over again & again
Selftorture gives entitlement I suffer so I’m entitled to get good scores
TOOL 8: Discover hidden procrastination

What do I do that is actually not so efficient?

- Planning can be a way to avoid working
- Not making the exercises, counting pages
- Starting from the same point again and again – avoiding the parts of the course that scare me
- Sitting on my desk and counting the hours that I ‘work’
- The function of suffering and complaining

Tool to challenge not helping rules: growth mindset

How to increase your intelligence:

1. Work hard
2. Focus on strategy vs performance
3. Do what is difficult for you
4. Make mistakes
5. Develop Growth mindset

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4. Work on emotional intelligence

The more you bring students in touch with their emotions, the less they will procrastinate!

- Teach students to monitor emotional reactions on their work.
- Understand and accept your emotions and reactions.
- Normalize feeling bad while working

People that do not procrastinate are not afraid of their negative feelings. They look into the future and imagine how they will feel when the work is done!
Tool 9: ACT-exercise

- Use ACT-Exercises to monitor and accept emotions that keep you from working. Acknowledge your resistance and don’t try to get rid of negative emotions.
- Use ACT-exercises, also for yourself, as a procrastination coach.

Don’t ruminate on your emotions, don’t focus on the resistance you feel, acknowledge it, and then say: ‘what’s the next action?’

David Allan

If all this doesn’t work …
Procrastination works ‘better’ for the self-image than the cure

Example:
‘I help my grandparents because it makes me instantly and undeniably happy.
The idea that I study hard and have no certainty about success is unbearable to me. So I work less hard.
So in stead of studying, I help my grandparents when I have to much stress.
I stay in bed because if I don’t, I am seduced to go out and help people. I do this only for the exams that give me stress.

Stay out of the negative ‘double bind’

You have to show you’re smart.
You have to work on your mistakes, so admit that you procrastinate.
You have to trust yourself.
You have to apply what I teach you.
Yes you can!
Procrastinator! Don’t be a procrastinator!
You’re frustrating me if you don’t do it.
You have to be ready to do it.
The ultimate tool: Install a ‘positive double bind’

People can learn from you!

• It prevents a lot of socially inappropriate behaviour
  • Ex: Procrastinate your angry emails or offensive reactions

• It helps you to have fun in your life
• It can be very efficient.
• You give other people the possibility to be the first.
• It helps you with difficult choices.
• It can be a form of selfdiscipline

• Every time you procrastinate, we eat a chocolate.
• Positive double bind: whatever you do, it is good!

What did we work on?

Personality and development define
  What we think and believe
The nature of our goals and intentions define
  how we can focus
Self control and willpower are important, but
  Changing habits takes time!
  Giving in to feel good is very reinforcing.
  Having a clear vision of our future self helps

Training emotional intelligence is very helpful
  (Prof. Tim Pychyl)
A meaningful life

How can you use this to make your life more meaningful?

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