

Reading 2

Read the text below and answer the following questions:

Why You Procrastinate (It Has Nothing to Do With Self-Control)

By Charlotte Lieberman

If you've ever put off an important task by, say, alphabetizing your spice drawer, you know it wouldn't be fair to describe yourself as lazy. After all, alphabetizing requires focus and effort — and hey, maybe you even went the extra mile to wipe down each bottle before putting it back. And it's not like you're hanging out with friends or watching Netflix. You're cleaning — something your parents would be proud of! This isn't laziness or bad time management. This is procrastination.

When we procrastinate, we're not only aware that we're avoiding the task in question, but also that doing so is probably going to have a detrimental effect on our morale. And yet, we do it anyway.

"This is why we say that procrastination is essentially irrational," said Dr. Fuschia Sirois, professor of psychology at the University of Sheffield. "It doesn't make sense to do something you know is going to have negative consequences." She added: "People engage in this pointless cycle of chronic procrastination because of an inability to manage negative moods associated with a task."

The particular nature of our aversion depends on the given task or situation. It may be due to something inherently unpleasant about the task itself — having to clean a dirty bathroom or organizing a long, boring spreadsheet for your boss. But it might also stem from deeper feelings related to the task, such as self-doubt, low self-esteem, anxiety or insecurity. Staring at a blank document, you might be thinking, *I'm not smart enough to write this. Even if I am, what will people think of it? What if I do a bad job?*

There's an entire body of research dedicated to the ruminative, self-blaming thoughts many of us tend to have in the wake of procrastination, which are known as "procrastinatory cognitions." According to Dr. Sirois, the thoughts we have about procrastination typically exacerbate our distress and stress, which contribute to further procrastination.

Although procrastination offers momentary relief, Dr. Sirois argues that it is what makes the cycle especially vicious. In the immediate present, shelving a task provides relief — "you've been rewarded for procrastinating," Dr. Sirois said. This is precisely why procrastination tends not to be a one-off behavior, but a cycle, one that easily becomes a chronic habit. Over time, chronic procrastination has not only productivity costs, but measurably destructive effects on our mental and physical health, including chronic stress, general psychological distress and low life satisfaction, symptoms of depression and anxiety, unhealthy behavior, chronic illness and even hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

If it seems ironic that we procrastinate to avoid negative feelings, but end up feeling even worse, that's because it is. And once again, we have evolution to thank. Procrastination is a perfect example of *present bias*, our hard-wired tendency to prioritize short-term needs ahead of long-term ones.

“We really weren’t designed to think ahead into the further future because we needed to focus on providing for ourselves in the here and now,” said psychologist Dr. Hal Hershfield, a professor of marketing at the U.C.L.A. Anderson School of Management.

His research has shown that, on a neural level, we perceive our “future selves” more like strangers than as parts of ourselves. When we procrastinate, parts of our brains actually think that the tasks we’re putting off — and the accompanying negative feelings that await us on the other side — are somebody else’s problem.

The human ability to procrastinate is deeply existential, as it raises questions about individual agency and how we want to spend our time as opposed to how we actually do. But it’s also a reminder of our commonality — we’re all vulnerable to painful feelings, and most of us just want to be happy with the choices we make. In the end, we have to find a better reward than avoidance — one that can relieve our challenging feelings in the present moment without causing harm to our future selves.

Questions:

1. In the first paragraph, the author thinks that procrastinating:
2. Why does the author say that procrastination is irrational?
3. According to the text, where does our reluctance to get on with tasks come from?
4. What does the article say about the vicious cycle of procrastination?
5. What is the relationship between evolution and procrastination, according to Dr. Hershfield?
6. What is the neural justification for procrastination, according to Dr. Hershfield’s research?