

The causes and effects of procrastination



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Procrastination is no stranger to today's culture in time management.

Studies conducted by Beswick, Rothblum & Mann, 1988; Gallagher, 1992; Rothblum, Solomon & Murakami, 1986 reports that 40% to over 50% of college students procrastinate. " Procrastination comes from the Latin 'pro', meaning 'forward, forth, or in favor of,' and 'crastinus,' meaning 'of tomorrow'" (Klein, 1971). Based on that, procrastination actually means the action of deferring a task. " Postponement by itself simply does not suffice, as procrastination is not the only activity that has a component of delay" (Steel, 2002). There are other kinds of actions that cause the delay of time. For example scheduling task A to a later time because task B is more important is not an act of procrastinating but more of an act of priority. The act of procrastination always refers to a negative act that reduces performance and quality of work. This however is a stereotype and might not be true. Procrastination is mainly caused by personality and mental state and can affect the procrastinator's performance and health.

Personality can be defined as " the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual's distinctive character" (Oxford, 2011). Some people have the habit of procrastination and some people simply do not. This shows that the habit of procrastination is caused by the individual's personality.

One of the biggest factors of procrastination is the fear of not succeeding. There is a term for this which is 'Atychiphobia' which means the fear of failure. " The higher the possibility of rejection (real or imagined), the more likely it is that the individual will experience anxiety as he approaches the task. Since even thinking about the project evokes feeling of anxiety, the procrastinator starts an alternate task or distraction" (Aitkens, 1982).

'Atychiphobia' may be caused by previous experience of the procrastinator that created such a traumatic effect that causes the procrastinator avoid certain task and push it as late as possible in order to prevent the repetition of the same experience. However Schouwenburg (1992) begs to differ by conducting a study and concluding that " fear of failure (Atychiphobia) and procrastination were only slightly correlated in the sample as a whole". Flett (1992) states that 'prescribed perfectionism' should also be blamed for the cause of procrastination. The excuse of 'prescribed perfectionism' is closely related to the fear of failure. As an individual's standard increases, the possibility of failure also increases thus increasing the fear of failure. There are three kinds of procrastination which are self perfectionism where we expect a certain standard for ourselves, other perfectionism where we set a standard for others and socially prescribed perfectionism where we thought others have set a standard for us. The studies carried by Flett (1992) have shown that only prescribed procrastination is related to procrastination. " As fear of failure was associated with neuroticism (a mental or personality disturbance not attributable to any known neurological or organic dysfunction), so it is connected with both low self-efficacy and low self-esteem" (Ellist & Knaus, 1977). People with low self-esteem often underestimate themselves and will not achieve their full potential thus affecting a rise in the rate of failure. As a 'butterfly effect', there is an increase of fear of failure and fear of not achieving perfection. Many do not realize but their confidence in getting the task done affects their reactions towards doing the task.

The mental state of an individual also can cause procrastination. "

Depression has also been related to procrastination" (Bestwick, 1988; McCown, Johnson & Petzel, 1989; Senecal, 1995). An individual who is depressed is more likely not in the mood of completing a certain task thus causing procrastination. According to Saddler & Sacks (1993), it is found out those older students who experience lower levels of depression experience lower levels of procrastination. As student age, the maturity level increases and ability to control their emotions also increases. Besides that, they also begin to learn not to act on emotions alone. Another factor of procrastination related to mental state is energy. According to Burka and Yuen (1983), it is harder to initiate task when we are tired. The term 'tired' can be defined as the depletion of energy and strength. Logically speaking, it is impossible to perform any task without energy. A study conducted by Solomon and Rothblum (1984) concluded that 23% of students said, " Did not have energy to begin the task" as a source of procrastination. It is painful and excruciating to perform a task when we are tired. Even if we manage to complete it, the quality of the outcome will be bad. " Extraversion is one of the more interesting, possible causes of procrastination... also... more complicated" (Steel, 2002). Extraversion is defined as the concern with what is outside the self. " Extraverts focus their psychic energy outwards" (Carl Jung, 1966). The world around them will become enchanting to them. Extraverts tend to be more energetic people. This will ironically be both a cause and prevention of procrastination. Energetic people will get their task completed as soon as possible and on the other hand the ones who involve themselves in too many activities will neglect it and procrastinate.

Logically speaking, the act of procrastination will affect performance. This might be caused by the unnecessary delay and reduced time duration to perform certain task. However, Tice & Baumeister (1997) argues that "whether a task is done far ahead of the deadline or only slightly ahead of it does not necessarily make any difference in the quality of work". The efficiency of work done by procrastinator is shown to be increased upon nearing the deadline according to the study performed by Steel (2002). The method used by him was recording the quantity of assignment completed in a day and time taken to complete it. The study done by Tice & Baumeister (1997) on the other hand shown that procrastinator received lower grades compared to non procrastinators on their term paper. The result shown by both studies contradicts each other. This shows that there is no clear relationship between procrastination and performance. The result of procrastination actually varies between different people and different task. Some people actually perform better when deadlines are near and some people prefer to have ample of time to complete a certain task. Another reason for procrastinator to have lower grades might be the procrastinator might have lower intelligence and less talented compared to the non procrastinator in the sample. This hypothesis is however proven wrong by Ferrari (1991) and Taylor (1979). There are no solid supports supporting Steel's claim besides the study he did claiming procrastinator do better work. Hence, his claim is not really solid and rejected in this case because the argument brought by Tice & Baumeister is more solid. The work done by procrastinator may contain compromises and sacrifices in order to meet the deadline. It is without a shadow of a doubt that the study done by Tice &

Baumeister stands and procrastination affect performance in a negative manner.

Tice and Baumeister also conducted a study between the effects of procrastination on health in 1996. The method used by them was taking 60 students volunteers taking a health psychology course as a sample. The due date for the task was announced and they were told that extension would in case of failure in submission. The participants was asked to fill up reports of any visit to health-care professionals. It was concluded that " procrastinator may enjoy a healthy, stress-free life when deadlines are far off, but they suffer more than other people when deadlines are imminent" (Tice & Baumeister, 1996). Procrastinators tend to have better health at the beginning of the semester and poorer health at the end. Students who do not procrastinate tend to have more health problem and stress but get the work done as fast as possible. " There are thus at least two significant benefits of procrastination... stress is lowered... illness is reduced" (Tice & Baumeister, 1997). In other words, procrastinators do not think of their work until the last minute thus having a clear mind and less stress. Non procrastinators on the other hand think about their work as soon as they get the task and their mind is filled with worries and anxiety to complete the task thus increasing their stress level and affecting their health. As deadline approaches, the tables are turned. Procrastinators will suffer higher stress level completing the task in a rush while non procrastinators relax more because they have completed their task. " The cumulative effect of procrastination on stress and health... are higher for procrastinators than for non procrastinators..." (Tice & Baumeister, 1997). In other words, the

benefits of procrastination are overshadowed by the negative effect later on when nearing deadlines. It is far more difficult to complete a certain task when nearing deadlines as proven by the increased stress levels. As a conclusion of the study done by Tice & Baumesiter (1997), the act of procrastination have a negative effect on the procrastinator's health in the sense of stress level.

As a conclusion, procrastination brings more harm than good. It is difficult to be prevented as it is caused by an individual's personality. Personality is shaped during the adolescent stage and is almost impossible to change upon entering adulthood. To prevent the habit of procrastination, parents and educators play the role of shaping an individual's personality. Procrastination is also caused by an individual's mental state. The individual must be matured enough to control his or her emotion and not let it interfere with their daily work and task in order to prevent falling into procrastination. As for the effects, it brings both positive and negative effects. However, the negative effects overshadow the positive effect therefore canceling off the positive effects. The general mindset and stereotype stating the act of procrastination is a negative act and affects quality of work and performance is true. Though this statement is proven, there are some special cases where procrastinators perform better under stress and short deadlines. As for health, in overall, procrastinators face a higher amount of stress when compared to non procrastinators. To sum it all up, the act of procrastination bring negative effect to most people and it is difficult but not impossible to be avoided.