

How to outwit procrastination

Yes, there really is such a thing as a Procrastination Clinic – at the University of Münster, no less. It describes the phenomenon as follows: “Procrastination is the scientific term for pathological delay behaviour. In contrast to everyday postponement, it represents a serious work disorder and can affect private, academic, and professional activities alike.” A case for the emergency services – who would have thought?

Peter Näf

I forgot to mention procrastination in my article “And – what’s your diagnosis?” Yet it’s probably the most common self-diagnosis my clients make, right after ADHD. It’s important, however, to draw a clear distinction: only a few people suffer from clinical procrastination that truly requires treatment. Most who diagnose themselves are describing an ordinary, everyday form of delaying tasks – one that can be managed quite well with a bit of structure and self-reflection.

For this non-pathological, everyday version of procrastination, Tom Kelley offers a lovely linguistic distinction in his book “Creative Confidence”: he prefers to speak of resistance rather than illness – because illnesses make us feel powerless, whereas resistance is something we can actually do something about.

What makes you procrastinate?

The reasons for ordinary procrastination are many. In my case, two stood out. First, I hadn’t realised that so-called D-tasks in the Eisenhower Matrix could simply be eliminated – and that B-tasks are almost impossible to accomplish without proper planning. Second, I set unrealistic goals – a clear violation of the SMART principle.

The Eisenhower Matrix categorises tasks

according to importance and urgency. D-tasks are neither important nor urgent. They’re often postponed but could just as well be dropped entirely. It’s astonishing how many of these still crop up in my to-do list – mostly out of habit long past its expiry date.

B-tasks, on the other hand, are important but not urgent – and thus perfect candidates for procrastination. In our hectic daily lives, we’re easily driven by what’s urgent, while the important, larger tasks remain untouched until they suddenly become urgent – and by then, there’s never enough time to complete them without stress.

Reframing

I only overcame my resistance to these tasks once I realised: in a world of constant urgencies, such tasks can only be managed through planning and fixed time slots. Without them, something seemingly more urgent will always take priority.

My second stumbling block was setting unrealistic goals. Whenever I decided to “finish a script by the evening”, I simply couldn’t bring myself to start. Why? Because my subconscious knew it was unrealistic – and dutifully blocked my motivation. Rephrasing the goal solved the problem: “I’ll work on the script from 2 to 4 p.m.” That was realistic – no inner resistance, and I could work with full concentration for two hours.

So be mindful of how you label your procrastination – words create reality. Otherwise, you might one day find yourself racing, sirens wailing, to the procrastination clinic.

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