



Procrastination

(Or The Spring Clean that Never Was)

A View from Impact Factory

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Procrastination

Well, we all suffer from it at some point (often many points in our lives).

Sometimes we can get completely paralysed when we think of just how much we have to do.

“Don’t put off until tomorrow....” somehow turns into “Don’t do today (or even tomorrow) that which you could possibly put off till forever”. And if we have such busy lives (as we increasingly seem to have), we don’t really have time to procrastinate, do we?

But however busy and well-organised we may seem to the outside world, most of us have things lurking around that stubbornly don’t seem to get done: filing a tax return, clearing out the attic, defrosting the freezer, going to the dentist, etc.

We can even remember the relief we experienced the last time we completed something that took forever to get done: “That wasn’t so bad after all,” is usually the sentiment.

And every year we vow that this year we’re really going to do a totally thorough Spring Clean. And how often does it just not get done?

Why not? Why do we get stuck on certain things and are unable to act with decisiveness and ease? Why do some things just keep falling off the bottom of the list?

Well here are some of the more usual reasons:

- Resentment
- Have to (so don’t want to)
- Burdensome
- It’s got to be perfect
- Feel overwhelmed at the thought of how much there is to do
- Fear
- Obligation
- Feel useless at it
- Overwhelming guilt
- Lack of any real commitment

So, one side of us is saying, “Just do it!” And the other is in thrall to all these powerful emotional blockages that mean we can’t. When all this stuff gets in the way, the only way to get back to “Just do it!” is if we can somehow choose to do it.

“Oh right, just choose to do it. You think that’s so easy? If I could just choose it, I would.”

First step: If we recognise there are some stumbling blocks that are just going to be hard to get over then we can begin to do something about it.

Second step: Giving yourself a bad time isn’t going to help. Telling yourself “I should” or “I must” is just going to reinforce the very thing that stops you.

Third step: Treat yourself a little more gently. There are good reasons why you don’t do these things. Give yourself a bit of empathy for your recalcitrance.

Ok, so start with working out what the payoff is for staying stuck. The first most obvious, is that you get to stay feeling bad. You don't just do it, and then you can continue to feel bad for not just doing it. A crazy, but common cycle that reinforces just how useless we are.

It wouldn't hurt to make a list (even a mental one) of what your own payoffs are for staying stuck.

And what would the payoff be for getting unstuck? The first most obvious, is relief; pure, untarnished, deep-breath-inducing relief. Of course, there are lots more. Now make a list (even a mental one) of what your payoffs would be if you get unstuck.

Having understood the whys and wherefores of stuckness and unstuckness, you're now somewhat better equipped to *choose* to do something about it.

Note: you are as yet no better equipped to actually do it; that comes next.

Here are some of the things you can put in place that will support you in getting 'it' – whatever 'it' is - done.

Possibly set a deadline (not so sure about this – may work for some people)

Find ways to get revved up

Create a plan: in bite size chunks

Enlist a friend

Review and progress reports

Rewards for small accomplishments

Lower your expectations (in other words, don't set your heights too high)

Start when you're feeling rested

Here are examples of how some of those could work for you.

Set a deadline – maybe

Some people (both of us, for two) like deadlines. They seem to give a clear boundary of when something needs to get finished. Now in our case we're both people who tend to leave things to the last minute. So in setting a deadline, we know that we can let acres of time go by without doing anything, because we know we'll meet the deadline no matter what.

Conversely, some people just hate the pressure of deadlines. Then the rebel in them comes out: 'I won't, you can't make me!' and they feel quite justified in procrastinating even more.

But what if you set an 'easy' deadline? What if you let the rebel have his or her say for a little bit, and then tried to coax it with, "Don't worry, we're just going to do a little bit today, and the rest of the time we can play."

No matter what your attitude is to deadlines, most of us need to get in the swing to get things done.

Revvig up

If you need to get revved up about thinking what would rev you up, here are some things that work for us:

Play your favourite music as loud as you dare

Give yourself a reward before you start

Call a friend and tell her/him your plans

Go for a walk, even if just around the block, to get your energy moving

Decide what your rewards are going to be after

There will be other things that get you revved up, that are individual to you. Do some of them! Once you're in a more motivated mood, it is much easier to choose to take on the task, and the rebel can go underground for a while.

Make a plan

The problem with making a plan is that you get to feel just how daunting the task is when you realise everything that needs to be done to get it done. We have a different kind of plan in mind.

Let's use the spare room as an example. Here's your spare room, filled to the brim with clutter; the detritus of your life that doesn't have a place anywhere else, so it gets shoved into the spare room. On rare occasions, you might get on a roll, and boxes which have been shoved in there for the past three years, the junk crammed under the bed, the drawers filled with clothes you might fit into after the radical diet (etc., etc., etc.), get sorted in a couple of days of frenzied activity.

In our experience, though that can happen, the spare room, more often than not, stays crammed.

Now, we don't want to discourage you from those sudden spurts of determination and energy; it's just that we know that more often the norm is to close the door and ignore the boxes, junk and clothes.

The "Just do it!" you says, OK, by tomorrow everything is going to be sorted, come hell or high water. The rebel says, "That's what you think."

Here's the happy medium; it's called:

Bite size chunks

These are a delightful and much more humane way of dealing with stuckness. They help you set small, achievable tasks. Here's how a bite size plan might work for the spare room:

Day One

Spend 1 hour just looking at the boxes and stuff and imagining what order might look like

Day Two

Spend 1 hour emptying everything into the centre of the room

Day three

Spend 1 hour putting the stuff into areas in the room:

Absolutely can't get rid of

Give away

Sell

Throw away

Day four

Spend 1 hour stuffing stuff into bin bags and taking them to your favourite charity shop or leaving out for the bin man

Day five

Spend 1 hour with a friend who will go through the Absolutely can't get rid of pile so you can start getting rid of more stuff

Day six

Repaint the room whether it needs it or not

Instead of beating yourself up (the usual thing we do to ourselves) for only sorting through one box, turn that sentiment on its head with an attitude shift that says: 'Great, that's one less box I have to deal with.'

Remember, you will most likely never fit into those clothes you're storing (and even if you eventually did, they'd probably be out of style), so get them to the Charity shop NOW!

Enlist a friend

The idea of enlisting a buddy isn't that they take on the role of ogre, keeping you to your word, so pretty soon you get to dread their phone calls. It's kind of like having a designated hand-holder.

Jo Ellen: I had a friend who put off doing something really important: a face-to-face meeting he was dreading. All I did to support him was simply to go with him. I never opened my mouth; I didn't even sit near him. But my mere presence gave him the courage to do what he needed to do.

Never underestimate the power of moral support!

On the other hand, if you feel snowed under by paper-work, for instance, get a buddy to sit with you and help sort through the piles. We can tell you, it's far easier for others to look through your stuff sometimes, because they have no emotional attachments to them – nor your guilt.

Incentives and rewards

We don't know about you, but we like being rewarded and appreciated for a job well done (or even a job somewhat well done, or even done at all). So we recommend that you do at least one thing connected to your stuckness and then give yourself a reward:

Take a luxe bath

Watch bad TV

Go out with a friend

Read a murder mystery (or some other indulgent reading)

Take another walk

Give yourself a huge pat on the back

Tell someone what you've done and make a big deal of it!

The techniques we've discussed can be used for anything – be it the dentist appointment you need to make or that major proposal you were supposed to submit last week.

We hope that they will help you be gentler with yourself. We hope that you will allow for the irrationality of “I must” vs “I won't” and accept that procrastination doesn't (if ever) make a whole lot of sense.

So you don't have to “Just do it”; but you can do it - just in your own time and in your own way.

You may not get all the spring-cleaning done, but you certainly could have more fun giving it a go.

If you are interested in talking to us further about our work on procrastination, please phone: 020 7226 1877 or e-mail: enquiries@impactfactory.com