What is Procrastination?

Procrastination refers to the avoidance of a specific task or work which needs to be accomplished.

Procrastination can lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, self-doubt and even depression amongst students. It has the potential for painful consequences. It can interfere with the academic and personal success of students.

Signs of Procrastination

Do any of the points below sound familiar to you?

- **Difficulty in making a start on a piece of work or revision**  
  Do you find yourself constantly putting back your starting time and never actually getting going? Are you often waiting for the "right moment" to start or for inspiration to strike you?

- **Craving diversion**  
  Does the need to tidy your room, do the shopping, phone home and so on become irresistible whenever you contemplate getting down to study? Are you easily distracted from your work by friends and social opportunities?

- **Ineffective working**  
  Do you spend time in the library but end up with little to show for it? Do you stare at a blank piece of paper rather than being able to start writing?

- **Last minute rushing**  
  Is all your work finally done at a breakneck speed the night before the final deadline or the exam? Do you often think you have not left yourself time to do the work justice?

- **Missed deadlines**  
  Do you feel you are always requesting extensions and making excuses? Are you losing marks on study projects because they are late? Do you find it hard to get to classes?

- **Nagging guilt**  
  Is your social and relaxation time spoilt by the continual feeling that you ought to be studying? Do you often feel you have got a lower grade than you should have achieved?

- **Disappointment and self-reproach**  
  Do you feel you are letting yourself down by putting things off? Do you think of yourself as lazy and as a poor student? Do you compare yourself unfavorably with others because of your procrastinating?

If you answer yes to many of these questions, you may well have developed the habit of putting things off.
The Many Faces of Procrastination

The following are examples of how students procrastinate.

- Do you act as though if you ignore a task, it will go away? The mid-semester test is not likely to vaporise, no matter how much you ignore it.

- Do you underestimate the work involved in the task, or overestimate your abilities and resources in relation to the task? Do you tell yourself that you grasp concepts so easily that you need only spend one hour on the physics problems which would normally take six?

- Do you deceive yourself into believing that a mediocre performance or lesser standards are acceptable? This form of avoidance can prevent you from consciously making choices about important goals in your life.

- Do you deceive yourself by substituting one worthy activity for another? Suppose you clean your room instead of writing your lab report. Valuing a clean room is fine but if that value only becomes important when there is a paper due, you are procrastinating.

- Do you believe that repeated ‘minor’ delays are harmless? An example is putting off writing your paper so you can watch five minutes of your favourite television program. If you don’t return to writing the paper after the five minutes have elapsed, you may stay tuned to the television for the entire evening, with no work being done on the paper.

- Do you dramatise a commitment to a task rather than actually doing it? An example is taking your books on vacation but never opening them, or perhaps even declining invitations for pleasurable events, but still not pursuing the work at hand and not getting needed relaxation. This way you stay in a constant state of unproductive readiness to work – without ever working.

- Do you persevere on doing only one portion of the task? An example is writing and rewriting the introductory paragraph of the paper but not dealing with the body and the conclusion. The introductory paragraph is important, but not at the expense of the entire project.

- Do you become paralysed in deciding between alternative choices? An example involves spending so much time deciding between two assignment topics that you don’t have sufficient time to write the paper.

Why do Students Procrastinate?

- **Lack of relevance**
  Things that aren’t personally important to you are often harder to want to do.

- **Working on someone else’s goals**
  Goals that others set for you are harder to want to pursue and lead to mediocre performance at best.
• **Resentment**
  Maybe some aspect of your course has proved to be a disappointment. Perhaps the course you are on was not your first choice and you resent that you could not do what you really wanted. You might have felt pushed into going to University against your will by parents or teachers. In situations where we feel wronged or let down or coerced but we cannot clearly see who is to blame, we may express our resentment by not doing the work which is asked of us.

• **Perfectionism**
  Believing that the only good task is a perfectly done task will make it hard to finish anything.

• **Evaluation anxiety**
  Worrying about how you or your project will be judged creates anxiety and makes it harder to work.

• **Ambiguity about the task**
  “If I don’t know exactly what I need to do, I can’t start. I’ll wait till I know more.”

• **Lack of skills to do the job /Under-developed study skills**
  “I can’t do this, so I won’t try.”
  Study-skills are the tools a student uses - the ability to scan books and articles fast; to summarise succinctly; to evaluate arguments quickly. If your skills are rusty or have not been sharpened, you will be like a carpenter working with blunt tools - everything will be much harder work. This problem may be made worse if English is not your first language. Seeing these as study skills problems helps you take steps to remedy the situation.

• **Guilt**
  You have procrastinated in starting on your assignments and studying and as a result, feel guilty when you want to start studying. This leads you to procrastinate further and you feel guiltier, and this chain of action becomes a vicious cycle.

• **Difficulty concentrating**
  When you sit at your desk you find yourself daydreaming, staring into space, looking at pictures of your boyfriend/girlfriend, etc., instead of doing the task. Your environment is distracting and noisy. You keep running back and forth for equipment such as pencils, erasers, dictionary, etc. Your desk is cluttered and unorganized and sometimes you sit/lay on your bed to study or do your assignments.

• **Poor time management**
  Poor time management means not managing time wisely. You may be uncertain of your priorities, goals and objectives. You may also be overwhelmed with the task. As a result, you keep putting off your academic assignments for a later date, or spending a great deal of time with your friends and social activities, or worrying about your upcoming examination, class project and papers rather than completing them.
- **Negative beliefs / Lack of self-confidence**
  Negative beliefs such as “I cannot succeed in anything” and “I lack the necessary skills to perform the task” may allow you to stop yourself from getting work done.

  Facing up to a complex essay or to a pile of demanding revision is never easy. It is made more difficult if you see the natural problems that arise as a sign that you are not a very good student rather than just as a sign that the work is hard. If you tend to blame yourself when problems arise, you then may not feel able to ask for help and to overcome the difficulties. This makes the problems worse.

- **Personal Problems**
  For example, financial difficulties, problems with your boyfriend/girlfriend, a family crisis, etc.

- **Fear of failure**
  You may think that if you don’t get an “A”, you are failure. Or that if you fail an exam, you, as a person, are a failure, rather than that you are a perfectly ok person who has failed an exam. This fear makes it hard for you to concentrate and start studying.

- **Finding the task boring**
  You’d rather do more interesting things and through this, procrastinate studying.

- **Over-aversion to discomfort**
  The reason that a degree is a respected qualification is because of the volume of hard work which goes into getting one. It is normal to find the work uncomfortable - and if you can face up to this discomfort, you can expect to get the knack of dealing with it surprisingly soon and so cease to notice it so much. If however you have got into the habit of putting off work whenever it feels too challenging, you never get good at doing uncomfortable things. It is as though you are never breaking through the "pain barrier" to the comfort beyond.

- **Getting overwhelmed**
  If we sit down to write an essay and find there is a lot to research, it is natural to feel a bit swamped. There are practical ways of solving this. If however you tend to lose direction, maybe reading books haphazardly without having a clear idea of how they can help you, you may get more and more overwhelmed until you put off starting the work altogether. Similarly if you have got all your work in a muddle, you may not know how to start getting it back in order.

- **Habituation and lifestyle**
  If you have become totally used to putting things off and to getting extensions, it can be immensely difficult to take the first step towards breaking the habit. The situation can be made worse if you have got in the habit of sleeping in very late, drinking, etc.

- **Depression**
  Inability to concentrate and lack of motivation can be a symptom of depression. Please refer to the handout on ‘Depression’ for signs and symptoms of depression, etc. Consider seeing the Student Counsellor if you find it very difficult to study because you feel depressed.
Breaking the Habit of Procrastinating

Visualise what you could achieve. Imagine having all your work done before the deadlines; imagine doing six hours work a day then going out without a guilty conscience; imagine getting good (but not perfect!) grades without having to panic and sit up all night. Does it seem like an improvement you would welcome? Try and work out what particular thing stops you studying; then try any of the following which seem appropriate.

• **Do something ... anything ...now**
  Do not wait for the moment to be right before you start work. Use an odd half-an-hour waiting to read a book and make some notes. Start an essay in the middle if this comes easier than starting with the introduction. The quicker you find a way to get going on things the quicker you will finish them. Learning to get started without ceremony is one of the main skills of time management.

• **Don't stop because something is difficult**
  If you come up against an obstacle, look for a way round it. For example if you cannot seem to get the structure of an essay right, make a rough outline and show it to the lecturer or check with a friend. It is important not to just put everything on hold when you meet a problem since the problem will then never be solved.

• **Be aware of your procrastinating thoughts**
  Among the more common of these thoughts are:
  – "One more day won't make any difference; I'll just put that off until tomorrow."
  – "It won't matter if I'm a few minutes late; no one else will be on time."
  – "I'll get started on it just as soon as 'Friends' is over."
  – "I can't start on this paper until I know just how I want the first paragraph to read."
  – "I work best under pressure."
  – "I'll play just one more computer game."
  – "I'll have just one more and then I've really got to get back and study."

Be aware of when you are having such thoughts and nip them in the bud by replacing them with thoughts that would enable you to take the small steps towards not putting things off.

Examples of such “replacement” thoughts are:
  – “Once semester starts, every minute of how I spend my time counts.”
  – “I'm in charge of my life and how I use my time.”
  – “I can always tape 'Friends' and watch it another time. I need to go through today's lecture notes before I sleep tonight.”
  – “I need to take the small steps to complete my paper. I can always start on having an outline of it instead and work on from there.”
  – “There's too much work at university level for me to start studying last minute. I need to study regularly each week.”
  – “I need to have shorter study breaks. Cutting down on not playing another round of this computer game counts.”
  – “I need to get started NOW and don't need to have one more….I can instead have another small break one hour later.”
  – Then IMMEDIATELY move on to doing what you need to do.
• **Make a list and a timetable**
  List what you have to do and estimate how long it will take. Then draw up a plan to represent the next few weeks, mark the deadlines and fit everything in. It might be a painful process if you have a lot to do, but this plan will give you a sense of direction. Don't beat yourself up if you don't stick to it 100% - or even 50%. It takes time to learn to plan. Be flexible and be positive by reminding yourself of what you have achieved, however small, through planning.

• **Arrange your work in an achievable way**
  It is hard to do more than one and a half hours at one time without a break. Give yourself time-off in your timetable. This can be a reward if you do well and can be used to complete studies if a totally unexpected event has thrown you off course.

• **Don't aim for the impossible**
  Work out realistically what standard you can achieve and start working towards that. It might be disappointing to decide you might only get a C grade but C in your hand is probably distinctly better than the A that exists only in your dreams. Once you have got started on the work you can always revise your estimate of your capability upwards if you find you have untapped potential.

• **Consider your lifestyle**
  It is difficult to work in an organised way if you tend to sleep in an unplanned way and so cannot predict when your day will start. Staying up late then sleeping late becomes a difficult cycle to break. The best way is to plan to get up early, irrespective of when you went to bed. If necessary, lay your clothes out and have everything ready for the morning before you go to bed so you can get going in the morning with a minimum of hassle. Try not to sleep during the day even if you feel tired so that you can get your normal daily cycle back.

• **Take action about anything you really cannot stand**
  If you really don't like your course or some units, think about how you can make the changes you need. For example, it may be better to act now and find something you like more rather than drift into the future not working and then fail to pass your degree. However if after consideration you decide you want to stick it out and study this course, go back to the top of this list and begin to get the studies done.

• **Motivate yourself to study**
  Several ways to do this are:
  – Dwell on your success and not on your failures
  – Remind yourself of your reasons of wanting to complete this course and get a degree.
  – Develop a positive attitude towards your studies; you are in charge of your studies!
  – Visualise yourself taking the steps in completing the degree.
  – Give yourself an appropriate reward once you have completed each study task each day. Examples of rewards are chatting on the net; surfing the net; having a coffee break with friends; emailing your friends or family, etc.
  – Study in small blocks instead of long time periods. For example, you will accomplish more if you study in 60 minute blocks and take frequent 5 to 10 minute breaks in between, than if you study for 2-3 hours straight, with no breaks.
• **Modify your environment**
  Eliminate or minimise noise/distriction. Ensure adequate lighting. Have necessary equipment at hand. Don’t get too comfortable when studying. A desk and straight-backed chair is usually best.

• **Study with friends**
  Study with friends or in the library if you can’t get started when you study alone or in your room.

• **Be aware of perfectionistic attitudes**
  Be aware of perfectionistic attitudes that you may have that tend to make you procrastinate. Please see handout on “Perfectionism”.

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University Wellbeing Centre
UWCstudents@ntu.edu.sg
6790 4462