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INTRODUCTION

I don't see how he can ever finish, if he doesn't begin.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Do you know someone who procrastinates? For many of us, the answer to that question involves taking a quick, and maybe guilty, look in the mirror and an uncomfortable “yes.” But don’t despair: You are not alone. Procrastination is unfortunately something that most of us are familiar with. We’ve either experienced it firsthand or observed it in others. And it’s something we want to stop. We would rather feel energized and productive when we make progress on a project or proud when a coworker or family member accomplishes what they set out to do. That is where this book can help.

If procrastination is more than just an occasional lapse for you or someone you know in your personal or professional life, then this book is for you. As you will discover while reading this book, procrastination can have negative and often serious effects across many different areas of life. The consequences of procrastination—which can range from work performance and productivity, to academic life, personal relationships, finances, and even physical and mental health—are far from trivial, especially when procrastination has become routine. So, if you are someone who manages employees, assigns academic work, counsels people on their finances, provides support and guidance on physical or mental health, or simply wants

to be more understanding of and compassionate toward the people you know who procrastinate, then this book is also for you.

You may be wondering why you should trust what I have to say about procrastination; after all, there are numerous books and blogs written by people about how to deal with procrastination. Few, though, have the 20+ years of experience researching procrastination that I do. I have published more than 30 scientific research articles and book chapters on the causes and consequences of procrastination, and I have delivered more than 100 talks on procrastination to scientific organizations and the public. So you can say that I am an expert on procrastination, professionally. But procrastination also holds personal significance for me. I've witnessed the toll procrastination has taken on family members and even myself. In writing this book, I've realized that I am more of a procrastinator than I care to admit. The irony of sometimes procrastinating while writing a book on procrastination is not lost on me. It is these personal observations and struggles, along with my professional expertise, that are the source of the unique insights, guidance, and tools I provide in this book.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PROCRASTINATOR

Procrastination usually involves a particular task that needs to be done, often by a certain date that was set by ourselves or someone else. Or, as with writing a will or getting a mammogram, the task has no set due date but still needs to be completed. In either case, for reasons that are not always clear at the outset, we just can't seem to bring ourselves to do it. Whether the task is big or small, when we procrastinate and put off a particular task we know there will be unpleasant consequences for not having taken timely action. Sometimes it may not be obvious that you are procrastinating until it's too late. Consider, for example, the following scenario, which may have a ring of familiarity:

Yet another day has passed, and Pat finds himself struggling to sit down and get to work on his task. It's that same task he has attempted to complete for 3 days in a row but with no success. It's that same task that he knows he has to get done today, or he will be letting people down and breaking promises that will cost them (and him) money. It's that same task that has made it hard for him to fall asleep at night because he is worried about whether he can do a good enough job on it. Today, when he sits down, he notices his chair isn't quite comfortable, so Pat convinces himself that a more comfortable chair is what he needs to finally get this task done. While going to retrieve the comfy chair from the other room, he notices a pile of papers sitting in disarray that needs to be tidied and organized, so he spends a few minutes organizing and filing. Feeling proud of himself for doing this, and mistaking busy-ness for productivity, Pat decides to treat himself with a well-deserved break on social media. Two hours later, he realizes that he is now hungry and it's lunchtime, so he decides it's best not to start that task until he's eaten. After all, he'll have better ideas, think more clearly, and have flashes of inspiration when he has a full stomach and no distracting stomach gurgling.

After lunch, however, Pat only feels sluggish and sleepy and even less motivated because there is now only half a day to work on a task that he reckons will take the whole day to complete. He reasons that it's best to wait to start until tomorrow now and get a fresh start after going to bed early and getting a good night's sleep. But as Pat is trying to fall asleep he is flooded with feelings of guilt, shame, and regret for not making progress with that task today. His thoughts turn to an unhelpful chorus of "Why couldn't I just get started?" and "What's wrong with me?" that further amplifies how bad he feels. He realizes that it's again going to be difficult to sleep—he needs a distraction. So he decides to go on his smartphone and view mindless TikTok or YouTube videos as a distraction to chase away those negative feelings so that he can finally sleep. Two hours and more videos than he can remember later, Pat is no closer to falling asleep or to feeling less ashamed of his lack of

productivity and broken promises. It's now well past the time he wanted to fall asleep, and his hope of being well rested so that he can be productive tomorrow is quickly fading. And so ends another day of procrastination, with unfulfilled responsibilities, lingering shame and guilt, and yet another night of broken and restless sleep.

This anecdote highlights some of the immediate and more obvious costs of procrastination: lack of productivity; potential financial costs; and feelings of guilt, shame, and regret. As you will learn in this book, though, these aren't the only costs. Procrastination, if left unchecked, can erode trust in your professional and personal relationships, take a toll on your physical and mental health, and rob you of reaching your goals and achieving your full potential in life.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN FROM THIS BOOK

It's tempting to entertain the idea that simply bringing the consequences of procrastination to light might be enough to halt it in its tracks. I, for one, would be overjoyed if this were the case. Sadly, though, like knowing that engaging in unhealthy lifestyle habits will most certainly lead to poor health later on, simply knowing the full range of impacts from procrastinating is not enough to end this problematic behavior. Awareness is important, yes, but if you want to find sustainable solutions for reducing procrastination, more is needed. This is why it is so important to understand the deeper reasons why we procrastinate.

By the end of this book, you will be able to

- recognize the psychological processes that lead to procrastination,
- develop effective ways to manage your automatic responses to the tasks on which you most often procrastinate,

- make changes to your environment so you're less likely to procrastinate,
- build skills to manage the situations that can trigger procrastination,
- become more aware of the internal scripts that can maintain procrastination,
- recognize when perfectionism may be feeding procrastination, and
- learn new ways to view tasks to reduce procrastination.

I hope that you'll also feel

- less ashamed about your procrastination,
- accepting of the uncomfortable negative emotions that may drive you to procrastinate,
- motivated to take action on your unfinished and lingering tasks, and
- compassionate toward yourself when you struggle with procrastination.

TO BE HUMAN IS TO PROCRASTINATE

Procrastination is a rather unique human behavior. On the one hand, we can recognize and accept that putting things off is a common problem for many people. This makes procrastination an easy target for jokes, jests, and puns. If you're like most people, including myself, you've procrastinated at some point in time, and this may be one of your motivations for reading this book. In fact, you may have seen the title of this book and said jokingly to yourself, "Sure, I'll read this, later." If so, you might imagine me bantering back, "Congratulations on making it to the Introduction!" It is exactly this commonplace

nature of procrastination that makes it easy to dismiss it with light-heartedness and sarcasm.

On the other hand, however, for many people procrastination is anything but a laughing matter. Pat's scenario is a good example of this. Anyone who occasionally procrastinates, including myself, might joke about procrastination on the outside while at the same time secretly knowing that we should be getting on with that task. Few people are proud of their procrastination and, if they are, then it probably isn't true procrastination (I discuss this further in Chapter 1). For others, procrastination can be a far more serious matter. Habitual procrastination may have robbed them of their dreams, their sense of self-worth, and their health and well-being. It may have had lasting and damaging effects on their relationships with their coworkers, supervisors, partners, family members, and friends.

We also tend to hold unflattering beliefs about people who procrastinate. When you think of someone who procrastinates, what traits come to your mind first? Maybe you think of someone who is lazy or impulsive. Or perhaps you think of someone who lacks discipline, has difficulty managing their time, or is unreliable. These are common responses when I ask people what they think of people who procrastinate. As I discuss in Chapter 4, there are good reasons why procrastination is associated with some less-than-desirable characteristics.

The problem is that when you are the person who has procrastinated, these same negative characteristics and judgments come to mind. We feel bad, and often ashamed, when we procrastinate. It's in these moments that we can easily forget that procrastination is something that almost everyone has done at some point. The realization that procrastination is so common doesn't make it something that should be ignored or left to creep back again; instead, acknowledging procrastination as being common and widespread can pave

the way toward us accepting, understanding, and resolving it so that we can reach our goals and fulfill our potential.

When we minimize or laugh about procrastination, we may be trying to cover it up or manage the not-so-obvious feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame we have about this uniquely human weakness. What we need instead are insights, strategies, and tools to help break the inertia of old habits and replace our default reactions to unpleasant tasks with ones that motivate us to take action. This book aims to provide you just such a toolkit so that you can better calibrate your efforts to reduce procrastination and choose the best strategies to effectively match your own situation.

FOCUS ON CAUSES, NOT SYMPTOMS

If you've looked into how to deal with procrastination before, you've probably come across a variety of different approaches and advice. The news and popular media, as well as self-help blogs and gurus, promote a host of strategies: manage your time better, put an end to your laziness, strengthen your willpower, become more motivated. Although some of these tactics have merit, they don't always address the complexity of issues that are central to understanding and managing procrastination.

Each of these strategies/approaches tells a different story about procrastination and its causes that can be more or less complete. Some of them offer explanations for certain aspects of procrastination, such as why adding structure to your tasks can make them more manageable. Others might emphasize the value of reducing distractions to rein in impulsivity. From where I sit, though, these common approaches to dealing with procrastination only highlight the symptoms of procrastination, for example, difficulty getting started with

tasks that seem large and overwhelming and letting temptations and distraction derail our best intentions. This isn't the same as answering the bigger question of *why* people procrastinate. In short, these popular approaches often lack a more in-depth view and understanding of the underlying psychological processes that can characterize and explain most instances of procrastination.

The focus of this book is on understanding and addressing the causes, not just the symptoms, of procrastination. You can always take temporary, Band-Aid steps to address the apparent symptoms of procrastination, but these will be less effective and less likely to result in sustainable habits than will addressing the core reasons why you procrastinate. For example, if someone is in pain, you can certainly make them more comfortable and give them pain medication, but if you don't directly deal with the pain's source it will likely continue or even become worse. I use this analogy not to medicalize procrastination but because it's one that seems most fitting to convey this point. We can think of procrastination in a similar way: Until you address the root causes of your procrastination, it is likely to continue to be an issue even after you have implemented other strategies that might seem reasonable.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

In this book, we'll explore the underlying reasons why people procrastinate through the looking glass of mood regulation. From this perspective you'll learn about how issues with managing mood, not time, lie at the core of procrastination. This is a view of procrastination and how to address it that is not commonly known and may seem opposite to what you might expect. Some of the ideas about procrastination that I present in these chapters can be counterintuitive and, at times, thought provoking, but all of the ideas, strategies, and approaches we explore in this book are informed by evidence and

theory, two ingredients that are essential parts of any scientific approach that endeavors to better understand human behavior.

I also believe it's important that any discussion of procrastination should include the voices of those who struggle with this common form of unnecessary delay. In one research study, I asked people to write about a time that they had procrastinated and to share, in as much or as little detail as they liked, what had happened and what they had experienced. One of the things I learned from this is that people are all too willing to share their personal experiences of procrastination, especially if their responses are anonymous. But I was also taken aback by how much detail they shared about their experiences and by the extent to which many reported struggling with their emotions when they procrastinated and suffered as a result of their procrastination. Examples of these experiences are featured throughout the book to illustrate key points and takeaway messages. If any of these excerpts resonate with your own experiences, then all the better. Remembering that procrastination is an experience that many of us struggle with is an important theme that runs throughout the chapters of this book and one that underscores many of the approaches for reducing procrastination that we will explore.

What I'm also hoping you'll learn from reading this book is that there is no formula to stop procrastination, no one simple rule to follow if you want to reduce your procrastination for good, especially if it has become an unwanted habit. This is mainly because the apparently rational reasons why we procrastinate are in fact quite complex. They exist within a system of our beliefs, personality traits, habits, past experiences and memories, physical and social environments, hopes and fears and, most important, emotions. In a human system, formulas that attempt to explain procrastination will only scratch the surface of the dynamics involved. Taking a formulaic approach overlooks the complexity of these dynamics and the power of the various factors and forces that can drive and maintain

our tendencies to unnecessarily put things off. This approach also overlooks procrastination as a very real human problem that deserves to be dealt with compassionately.

The insights and approaches that I offer in this book are instead based on accepting and even embracing these complex and often irrational forces that can drive our procrastination. When we see procrastination as being mainly an issue of difficulty in coping with negative emotions, then it becomes clear that if we want to reduce procrastination we need to understand and reduce the sources of these emotions. Why we might see a task as being unpleasant, or why we may feel stressed from thinking about doing even the simplest of tasks, can vary across people, tasks, and circumstances. This book will give you the insights and the tools you need to understand and address the reasons for the negative emotions that fuel procrastination.

Of course, there are some common sources and reasons why a task may cause us to feel frustrated, uncertain, anxious, stressed, fearful, or just plain bored and make us want to procrastinate. We'll explore what these are and how they can be dealt with using science-informed solutions throughout the book. But whether we actually do procrastinate that unpleasant task is often decided by how aware we are of our emotional reactions to that task and by the tools we have for managing the sources of these emotions. Thankfully, awareness and management of the negative states we experience when faced with a task can be learned and acquired and are the focus of several chapters in this book.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Having a set of concrete, ready-to-implement tools to tackle procrastination is crucial for reducing procrastination and any urges you may have to delay unnecessarily. I could easily provide you with this

toolkit in just a couple of brief chapters, but I'd like to leave you with something more by the time you finish this book. I'd like to empower you with new insights and strategies to better understand and reduce procrastination in a sustainable way. After reading this book, you will have a broader understanding of procrastination and its consequences as well as a better understanding of the sources of the negative emotions that can drive procrastination. You'll also learn different ways to manage these negative emotions, whether they are acute jolts of stress, frustration, or anxiety or more lingering feelings of shame and guilt from procrastinating.

To meet these goals, this book is structured into three parts. The chapters in Part I (Chapters 1–4) deal with understanding and recognizing what is and is not procrastination. Now, you may be thinking that this should be obvious—who doesn't know what procrastination is? As we will discuss in Chapter 1, though, procrastination isn't as easy to spot as most people think it is. In Part I we will also review how and why procrastination can have harmful consequences across a number of important areas of life. The intent is not to be judgmental or to stir up feelings of shame for procrastinating—anyone who has procrastinated will know that we do this quite well without any outside help. Instead, we review these consequences with the aim of becoming more accountable for our procrastination. Plus, on the flip side, you'll develop a better understanding of the gains and improvements you can experience in different areas of your life when you use the strategies and tools described in this book to address your procrastination.

In Part II (Chapters 5 and 6), we will deep dive into the underlying reasons why we procrastinate, from the perspective of short-term mood regulation. All behaviors have an origin story. Procrastination's origin story is rooted in the negative emotions we experience when faced with certain tasks. We'll explore the psychological science that explains why mood matters when it comes to understanding and

reducing procrastination and the unexpected relationships between mood and our perceptions of time. We'll also examine the "why" of the negative emotions we can experience when we are tempted to procrastinate and the thought habits and beliefs that often fuel and even amplify any negative mood we can have in relation to the tasks we may be struggling with.

The third and final part of the book (Chapters 7–10) pulls together all the evidence-informed insights from the previous chapters to present and explain a set of strategies and tools to help reduce procrastination. We cover a range of approaches that are known to be effective for helping people dial down negative emotions and resist falling into the trap of short-term mood regulation. It's equally important, though, to replace old habits with new ones that can fuel motivation to stay on track with your tasks and goals. We'll explore strategies that can help achieve this and examine some of the usual suspects that can contribute to procrastination, such as distractions and social temptations, and discuss why and how to best deal with these procrastination triggers from the perspective of mood regulation.

In every chapter I have included short "Take a Moment" sections and longer, end-of-chapter exercises to help you to begin to apply what you have learned. These will also provide you with an opportunity to test-run some of the tools and strategies featured in the chapters. My 20+ years of research and teaching have taught me that people learn best through active engagement. Having firsthand experiences with new concepts and principles through these activities can deepen your understanding of what they are and thus deciding whether they are right for you. Some of these activities are based closely on the research discussed, and others are ones I've designed specifically for this book. Although I hope these activities will be helpful, it ultimately will be up to you to decide which will work best for you on your own journey toward understanding and reducing procrastination.

Reading this book and engaging with the exercises will take you on a journey toward a deeper understanding of what procrastination is and of the reasons why you procrastinate. These insights can empower you to change how you view your tasks, your goals, and yourself. The repertoire of strategies, insights, and tools for reducing your procrastination are based on an alternative view of procrastination that places your emotions at the forefront. According to this view, responding to your procrastination in a kinder and gentler way is not only something you deserve but actually one of the best ways to ensure that you can and will complete your tasks and goals on time and with compassion toward yourself.