

Freeing Ourselves From Procrastination

A Health Journeys Wellness Report

by **Traci Stein, PhD, MPH**

Contrary to popular belief, procrastination is unrelated to how smart we are, or our actual ability to complete a task. Lots of very smart, capable people procrastinate.

This is a perfect time of the year to talk about setting goals and actually achieving them. An arch nemesis, procrastination, is ubiquitous, however. Nearly all of us procrastinate some of the time, and some of us do it nearly all of the time. Chronic procrastination can cause significant problems for us.

In order to conquer procrastination, it's important to understand what it is and isn't, why people procrastinate, and ultimately, what we can do to get things done.

What is (and isn't) Procrastination?

Put simply, procrastination is putting off either starting or completing something that we've consciously agreed to do.

It's worth noting that procrastination is different from choosing to begin a project at a later time either because there is adequate time to do so, or because the benefits of putting off a task outweigh the costs of doing it right away.

Putting things off can temporarily reduce our anxiety, alleviate boredom or can allow us to indulge our impulses to do more interesting things.

For example, let's say you are planning to have a dinner party in three weeks. Buying fresh vegetables today to make a salad you'll serve in three weeks would be an impractical choice (the vegetables will surely go bad by then). So putting off shopping for salad ingredients until later - perhaps a day or two before the event - is a much better decision. This planned, logical delay is different from procrastination - which might look like going to the store to buy vegetables a half hour before the guests are to arrive, when you are unlikely to have adequate time to get home and prepare them.

Additionally, procrastination is different from prioritizing another task as more pressing and thus attending to that task first. Being able to prioritize is adaptive and in some cases, essential for our survival. Keeping up with household chores is important, but putting off seeing a doctor when we're very ill because there's so much laundry to do is something most of us would consider unwise.

Finally, contrary to popular belief, procrastination is unrelated to how smart we are, or our actual ability to complete a task. Lots of very smart, capable people procrastinate. Nor is procrastination necessarily the same as being lazy, although people who put things off may be told (and believe) that laziness is the reason.

Why Do We Procrastinate?

Putting things off can temporarily reduce our anxiety about a task, alleviate boredom or other unpleasant feelings associated with the work, and can allow us to indulge our impulses to do more interesting things.

The problem is that in the long term, people who procrastinate tend to do less well on tasks than they would have otherwise, and some never reach their goals. In the end, procrastination often creates more problems than it solves.

Eight Common Reasons Why We Procrastinate

Some of the most common reasons for procrastination are:

1.) Not liking an aspect of the task at hand

2.) Anxiety.

In the short term, avoiding the task reduces anxiety. In the long term, however, task avoidance tends to increase feelings of anxiety and self-blame.

3.) Worrying we will fail

4.) Worrying we will succeed.

Sometimes we are consciously or unconsciously conflicted about achieving a goal. Weight loss, professional success, and finishing school are some common examples of goals where this is an issue. For example, feeling undeserving of success, or believing that success will threaten someone close to us are common reasons why people may repeatedly sabotage their goals via procrastination.

5.) Lacking confidence that we have the ability to complete the task.

This is also known as “low self-efficacy.” If you think you can’t do something, you are unlikely to stick with it.

6.) Difficulty with concentration and focus.

This can lead us to be easily distracted by external factors, like the beep of incoming emails, or by internal factors, such as the impulse to surf the internet (e.g., “Oh wait, I just need to check online to see what the Kardashians wore to the Oscars...”).

7.) Having a hard time breaking the larger goal down into smaller, discrete tasks.

8.) Believing we will have to work all of the time in order to finish something.

So, What Can We Do?

The good news is that there are a variety of things we can do to stop procrastinating and get things done. Commonly recommended tools, usually used in some combination, are cognitive-behavioral strategies, insight-oriented therapy, and mind-body techniques such as guided imagery, hypnosis or mindfulness meditation. These approaches can help foster a greater understanding of what has been getting in the way of completing things, and help us to interrupt the typical chain of thoughts-feelings-behaviors by substituting new and more effective behaviors.

1.) Reconnect to the goal.

People who want to kick the procrastination habit need to reconnect with the part of them that originally agreed to the goal. If we use the example of weight loss, we need to remember why it is we decided to lose weight in the first place. The reasons are most motivating when framed positively (e.g., “I want to be healthy and have more energy” or “Because I want to be able to dance at my children’s weddings” versus “Because I hate my body right now”). It’s important to partner with our “inner ally,” who encourages us, rather than empowering the “inner critic.” Remembering why we agreed to the goal can help us negotiate with the part of us that feels like giving up.

2.) Analyze the chain of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that got us off task.

Using the weight loss example: “When I think of going to the gym, I worry about being the most out-of-shape person there. This makes me feel anxious and hopeless. Then I typically find other ‘legitimate’ activities to distract me, like doing chores, or I might eat something sweet to calm me down.”

Understanding this chain can help us change our response (the behavior) to unpleasant thoughts and feelings, perhaps looking something like this: “When I get anxious about going to the gym, and start to crave sweets, I make a deal with myself to breathe for a few minutes to calm down, and then agree to go to the gym anyway, even if only for 5 minutes.” Changing the behavior ultimately affects the entire chain (we see that we can survive, and perhaps even enjoy exercise and the associated payoff, thus decreasing our anxiety and hopelessness). Changing the chain can lead to success.

3.) Break the larger goal into smaller, achievable tasks.

The research shows that breaking down a task into manageable pieces makes working toward goals less daunting, and reduces anxiety. It also provides multiple opportunities for smaller successes. Each triumph can lead to greater self-efficacy, or the understanding that we can, in fact, achieve our goal.

4.) Visualize success.

See yourself moving along points on a timeline toward the completed goal.

Guided imagery and hypnosis are especially powerful tools for making success a mental, and eventually literal, reality, and decreasing anxiety and self-doubt.

5.) Practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness practice, such as attending to our own breath, and observing our own thoughts as they come and go, without grabbing on to them, is a very effective tool for learning to observe distressing feelings like anxiety, self-doubt, and fears of success or failure - without buying into them.

6.) Train the brain to improve focus and resist distractions.

Mindfulness is also an excellent tool for engaging and strengthening the frontal and prefrontal areas of our brain. These areas are responsible for analyzing situations, coming up with the best plan for success, and staying focused. Regular mindfulness meditation can help us notice potential distractions and bring our focus back to what we're working on. In addition, recent research has shown that long-term practice is associated with increased thickness in these brain regions, indicating a very real physiological change.

In summary, procrastination is a challenge for a large number of people, and can cause significant problems. The good news is that there is quite a bit we can do to change old patterns, develop new skills, and get things done!



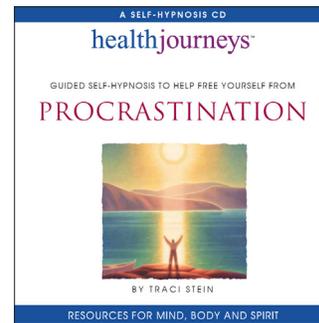
About the Author

Traci Stein, PhD, MPH, is a practicing psychotherapist and Columbia-trained clinical psychologist, ASCH-certified in clinical hypnotherapy. She is the former Director of Integrative Medicine in the Department of Surgery at Columbia University, and has combined

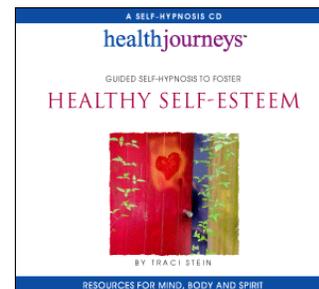
integrative therapies, including hypnosis, with conventional medical and psychotherapy practice. Her passionate commitment to mind-body healing has spanned two decades.

Explore Health Journeys extensive guided imagery catalog at www.healthjourneys.com

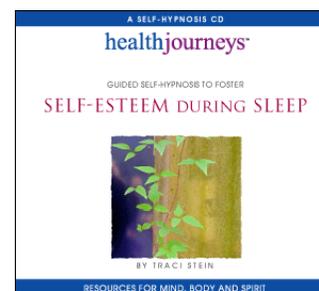
Featured Guided Imagery Titles by Traci Stein, PhD, MPH



Procrastination is designed to help procrastinators put the most effective parts of the brain in the driver's seat and develop the best strategies for getting things done. It draws from the latest research and features 2 hypnotic guided imagery tracks, plus a separate track of affirmations. Regular use can help listeners break large goals into discrete, manageable tasks; sharpen focus and concentration; clearly visualize the completed goal; increase feelings of confidence; and form healthy, well-timed work habits.



Healthy Self-Esteem features two guided self-hypnosis exercises - a brief version (8 minutes) and a long one (31 minutes), as well as 11 minutes of empowering affirmations, all designed to foster a healthy and enduring sense of self, whether for listening in a relaxed state or on the go. The use of rich, healing-themed imagery and hypnotic techniques help release self-doubt; cultivate feelings of personal mastery; envision a future stronger self, and encourage present moment self-acceptance - all while embracing positive change. Especially impactful when used with the Fostering Self-Esteem during Sleep program.



Self-Esteem During Sleep is a complement to the Healthy Self-Esteem CD, and features potent hypnotic imagery specifically designed to foster a stronger, more confident, and healthy sense of self worth while sleeping in a deeply restorative state. Especially helpful for those whose Inner Critic tends to interfere with positive changes during the waking state, as well as for those who would like to enhance sleep quality while doing the work of inner healing.