



Chronic procrastination is on the rise, say experts,
and appears to be prevalent among academics.
We really should get around to doing something about it.



“Begin doing what you want to do now. We are not living in eternity. We have only this moment, sparkling like a star in our hand – and melting like a snowflake.”

– Francis Bacon, English philosopher

IF ASKED TO NAME the world’s greatest artist, many would answer Leonardo da Vinci. Because of his varied talents he is often viewed as the personification of the term “Renaissance man.” In light of this exalted status, it may be surprising to learn that da Vinci struggled with procrastination. He consistently imagined and started projects only to abandon them, leaving a litany of unfinished paintings, sculptures and building designs in his wake. The *Mona Lisa* was 15 years in the making. Worse was *The Virgin of the Rocks*, a painting commissioned with a seven-month deadline. He finished it 25 years later. Shockingly, although da Vinci lived to age 67, he completed only 15 paintings and a handful of architectural designs.

The realization that even geniuses like da Vinci can fall prey to procrastination indicates how pervasive an affliction it is. Whether it is the late filing of taxes, last-second cramming for exams or postponing an assignment to binge-watch a season of *Game of Thrones*, most of us have found ourselves locked in that familiar cycle of purposeful delay, self-recrimination and regret – and the strain of the ongoing pandemic is likely not helping things.

Piers Steel, a professor of human resources and organizational dynamics, and holder of the Brookfield Research Chair at the University of Calgary’s Haskayne School of Business, defines procrastination as not just any delay but an irrational one – that is, when we voluntarily put off tasks despite believing that we will be worse off for doing so. “When we procrastinate, we know that we’re acting against our best interests,” says Dr. Steel.

In his 2010 book, *The Procrastination Equation: How To Stop Putting Things Off and Start Getting Things Done*, Dr. Steel says surveys reveal that about 95 percent of people admit to procrastinating at least some of the time. But within that broad group there is a subset of people who consider procrastination to be a defining characteristic of their personalities. In the 1970s, surveys indicated that only five percent of the population felt they

belonged in this chronic category, says Dr. Steel. Today, that figure has risen to about 20 percent.

Chronic procrastinators are people whose tendency to postpone permeates all aspect of their lives. “It’s a maladaptive lifestyle. They do it at home, school or work, and in relationships or with responsibilities,” says Joseph Ferrari, a professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago, who is alarmed by the number of people affected. “Let’s put that 20 percent figure in perspective,” he says. “It’s higher than the number of people who suffer from substance abuse, alcoholism or depression, which are all considered serious disorders.”

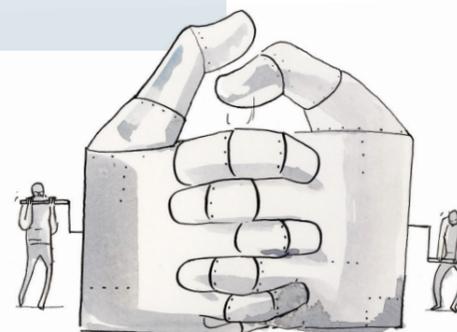
And yet, Dr. Ferrari says there is a peculiar resistance in scientific circles to taking the subject seriously, a tendency that has not changed much since he first began investigating the topic in the late 1980s. “I’m not sure what it is. It may be that so many academics suffer from procrastination that the subject hits too close to home.”

What has changed in recent years is the notion that procrastination is caused by poor time management or some moral failing. Instead, most researchers now contend that procrastination is a complex psychological issue. Tim Pychyl, an associate professor of psychology at Carleton University and author of the 2013 book *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle: A Concise Guide to Strategies for Change*, says that procrastination is caused by an inability to properly regulate emotions. “We put off a task because it makes us feel bad – perhaps it’s boring, or difficult, or we’re worried about failing – and to make ourselves feel better in the moment, we start doing something else, like watching videos,” says Dr. Pychyl, who also writes the Don’t Delay blog for *Psychology Today*. “But this is a self-defeating coping strategy, because it only works in the short term – the task doesn’t go away. Eventually, you’re left with the task to complete, the negative emotions again, plus the added stress of a time constraint.”

Why are humans so prone to this sort of self-sabotage? Recent experiments using functional MRI conducted by Hal Hershfield, a social psy-

Rev me up

Changing an ingrained habit like procrastination is not easy, but Carleton University’s Tim Pychyl is convinced it can be done. He offers one important tip. The next time you’re tempted to procrastinate, “make your focus as simple as ‘What’s the next action I would take on this task if I were to get started on it now?’” Doing this, he says, takes your mind off your feelings and onto easily achievable action. “Our research and lived experience show very clearly that once we get started, we’re typically able to keep going. Getting started is everything.”



chologist and associate professor of marketing at UCLA’s Anderson School of Management, have shed some new light on the question. Dr. Hershfield discovered that when we process information about our present and future selves, different sections of the brain are activated. That may sound logical, but what is surprising is that the part of the brain that lights up when we imagine our future self is the same as the one that activates when we imagine a stranger. This quirk in our neural network allows our present self to feel free to satisfy its immediate desires at the expense of our future self, who presumably may have more energy and more time to devote to the task that our present self is avoiding.

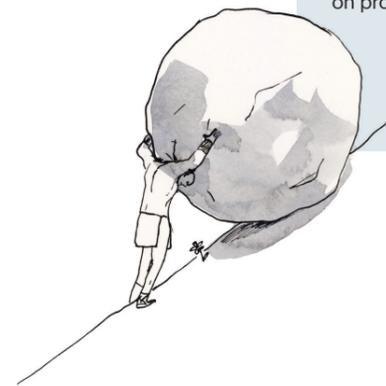
Dr. Pychyl believes that gaining a better understanding of the neurobiology of the brain will help psychologists develop strategies for combating procrastination. In the meantime, he and his colleagues are getting a clearer picture of what sort of person is most likely to procrastinate. Although the affliction cuts across occupations, nationalities and ages, there are some constants. In 2007, Dr. Steel published a review of almost 800 studies on procrastination that ultimately identified four character traits that make procrastination more likely: low self-confidence, task aversiveness, a high degree of distractibility and impulsiveness, and an inability to set realistic and immediate goals.

All of these traits make some people prime targets for the hypnotic allure of today’s glittering technology. Dr. Steel says that the proliferation of smartphones and various social media has ushered in a whole new order of temptations that are cleverly designed to break down self-discipline. These temptations exploit the limbic system, the part of the brain that governs our emotional responses and drives the impulse to live for the moment, which Dr. Steel believes has boosted the incidences of procrastination.

Not everyone agrees. Dr. Ferrari at DePaul thinks the notion that technology makes it easier to procrastinate is a fallacy. “There’s always been technology to make things easier – think how the telephone helped reduce the need for writing letters, cars helped replace the horse and buggy,

“Nothing is as fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task.”

– William James, American philosopher



Feline fascination

The emotional-regulation view of procrastination helps explain some strange modern phenomena, such as the incredibly popular fad of watching online cat videos. In 2014, there were more than two million cat videos posted on YouTube that attracted close to 26 billion views. In 2015, Jessica Myrick at the media school at Indiana University Bloomington surveyed 7,000 people about their viewing of cat videos and how it affects their moods. Her findings, which were published in the scholarly journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, confirmed procrastination as a common motive for viewing the cat videos, and that watching them led to a boost in mood. As Dr. Myrick wrote: “If people were watching a cat video because they were procrastinating, but that cat video made them feel really happy, it tended to cancel out the guilt they felt from procrastinating. They still reported that cat video viewing as a really enjoyable entertainment experience,” she says. “That was a new wrinkle in the literature on procrastination and media effects.”

and the snooze button helped people delay getting out of bed. All those technologies were developed in the 19th or 20th centuries. Technology today doesn’t make it easier to procrastinate, it’s all about how you use or don’t use it.”

Dr. Steel believes this attitude discounts the seductive power of the digital world. “Every vulnerability that people have can now be codified,” he says. “It is now possible to develop detailed personal profiles of individuals in order to maximize the potential of advertising. There are 10 billion videos on the web, yet because of targeting, only the most succulent will be presented to you.”

There is more unanimity among psychologists about the scope of procrastination in the academic world – everyone agrees that it’s rampant. Dr. Pychyl goes so far as to call it “the number one problem in education today.” According to his research, students who procrastinate take longer to hand in assignments, spend more hours working on projects and on studying, have more unfinished assignments, and are more likely to engage in cheating and plagiarism. His research also suggests that these academic procrastinators aren’t all one personality type, but that they do share a couple of common traits: a lack of self-confidence and a belief that they have little control over their academic success.

Dr. Steel agrees that procrastination is especially rife among college students, with 80 to 95 percent of them suffering from it at least some of the time. He cites several reasons why they are so susceptible. “Students are still learning their self-regulatory skills. They are young and impulsive, and many have never lived on their own before. Also, essay writing is difficult and there is no guarantee that the hard work you do will actually be recognized by the professor.” Dr. Steel also believes that the structure of university courses, with distant dates for the completion of essays, encourages procrastination. Then, too, there is the distraction-filled environment

“I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they fly by.”

– Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.

that surrounds many students. “College dorms are infernos of procrastination because the enticements – alcohol, camaraderie, sex – are white hot.”

“Seventy percent of the time when a student gives an excuse for not getting something done, they are lying,” says Dr. Ferrari. “My printer died last night. My grandmother died, again. The problem is that most profs never ask for proof. They let it slide.”

The procrastination plague may exact an especially heavy levy on graduate students, where the term ABD (all but dissertation) has become distressingly commonplace, says Dr. Steel, leaving about 50 percent of grad students without a degree after several years of dedicated study.

Procrastination is also prevalent among faculty members. “I call professors ‘unregulated scientific entrepreneurs,’” says Dr. Steel. “They’re prone to procrastination because they do not suffer any immediate repercussions for failing to produce papers. They have slippery deadlines.”

The consequences of not completing tasks on time or not finishing them at all can take a physical toll on people’s health. Some of those effects have been measured by psychologist Fuschia Sirois, formerly of Bishop’s University and the University of Windsor who is now at Sheffield University in the U.K. “In one study we found that students who scored high on a measure of chronic procrastination reported a greater number of acute health problems such as headaches, muscle aches and strains, digestive issues, and flus and colds,” says Dr. Sirois.

In a 2015 study of nearly 800 people in Canada and the United States, Dr. Sirois found evidence that trait procrastination – a tendency to delay important tasks despite the negative consequences – was associated with having hypertension and cardiovascular disease. The findings held true even after controlling for factors such as age, ethnicity and key personality traits.

Dr. Sirois theorizes that procrastinators are likely to put off important health behaviours like going to the doctor and getting regular exercise.

She also suspects that chronic procrastinators cope poorly with the constant stress caused by delay. “They get caught in a cycle of negative self-talk and can be very self-critical, which doesn’t help.” Feelings of guilt and shame may surface. “For chronic procrastinators, it only feeds back into the negative emotions that led them to procrastinate in the first place, thus fueling a vicious circle,” says Dr. Sirois.

Even so, you don’t have to be a chronic procrastinator to suffer lingering psychological effects. As Dr. Pychyl notes: “I did my PhD on goal pursuits and how it affected well-being. I interviewed a number of doctoral students. They said that the bane of their existence was the tremendous amount of guilt they suffered because of procrastination. It’s a destructive emotion. It affects our well-being and our health.”

In a 2016 TED talk, blogger and self-confessed procrastinator Tim Urban touched on this when he discussed an insidious kind of procrastination that seeps in when there’s no deadline and no reason to panic. For some reason or another, we simply never get around to doing what we set out to. It’s particularly damaging for freelancers and artists – careers that rely on self-starting – but also afflicts people outside of work, in how they handle their health and relationships. “Long-term procrastination makes people feel like spectators in their own lives,” says Mr. Urban. “The frustration isn’t that they couldn’t achieve their dreams, it’s that they could never start chasing them.”

Sadly, for some the message arrives too late. Leonardo da Vinci could surely have benefited from some sage psychological advice, and the world at large would have reaped the reward. Instead, he was consumed by regret. The most damning condemnation of his condition came from the master himself, who on his deathbed apologized “to God and Man for leaving so much undone.”



LA VOLEUSE DE TEMPS

La procrastination chronique est à la hausse, disent les experts, et elle semble répandue parmi les universitaires.

Tôt ou tard, il faudra agir. **par** Kerry Banks

REMPLIR NOS DÉCLARATIONS de revenus en retard. Nous bourrer le crâne précipitamment avant un examen. Regarder une saison complète du *Trône de fer* en rafale au lieu de faire un devoir. Nous nous sommes presque tous déjà retrouvés dans ce cycle familial de retard volontaire, d'auto-réprimande et de regrets – et la pression qu'entraîne la pandémie actuelle n'aide probablement pas les choses.

Piers Steel, professeur en ressources humaines et en dynamique organisationnelle et titulaire de la Chaire de recherche Brookfield à l'École d'administration des affaires Haskayne de l'Université de Calgary, définit la procrastination comme un retard irrationnel qui nous amène à repousser des tâches même si nous pensons empirer ainsi notre situation. « Nous savons qu'il n'est pas dans notre intérêt de procrastiner », dit-il.

Comme l'indique M. Steel dans son livre *The Procrastination Equation: How to Stop Putting Things Off and Start Getting Things Done* publié en 2010, des sondages révèlent qu'environ 95 pour cent des gens admettent

procrastiner occasionnellement. Or, parmi cette majorité, un sous-groupe considère la procrastination comme une caractéristique fondamentale de leur personnalité. Dans les années 1970, seulement cinq pour cent de la population admettait se classer dans cette catégorie de procrastinateurs chroniques, fait remarquer M. Steel. Aujourd'hui, c'est environ 20 pour cent.

Ces cas chroniques procrastinent dans tous les volets de leur vie. « C'est un comportement présent à la maison, à l'école et au travail, et qui s'immisce dans les relations. La personne n'assume pas ses responsabilités, explique Joseph Ferrari, professeur en psychologie à l'Université DePaul de Chicago, alarmé par le nombre de gens touchés.

Or, M. Ferrari souligne la résistance particulière des cercles scientifiques à prendre le sujet au sérieux, une tendance qui n'a pas beaucoup changé depuis qu'il a commencé à étudier le sujet à la fin des années 1980. « J'ignore la cause exacte. Trop d'universitaires se sentent peut-être visés. »

Dans les dernières années, l'idée selon laquelle la procrastination découlerait d'une mauvaise gestion du temps et d'un échec moral a été remise en question. La plupart des chercheurs s'entendent plutôt pour dire que la procrastination est un trouble psychologique complexe. Tim Pychyl, professeur agrégé en psychologie à l'Université Carleton et auteur du livre *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle: A Concise Guide to Strategies for Change* publié en 2013, affirme que la procrastination découle d'une incapacité à réguler adéquatement les émotions. « Nous repoussons une tâche parce qu'elle génère des émotions négatives – peut-être est-elle ennuyeuse ou difficile, ou peut-être avons-nous peur d'échouer. Pour nous sentir mieux dans le moment présent, nous faisons autre chose. Toutefois, cette stratégie d'adaptation n'est efficace qu'à court terme. »

Pourquoi les humains sont-ils si enclins à s'autosaboter? Hal Hershfield, psychosociologue et professeur agrégé en marketing à l'École de gestion Anderson de l'Université de Californie à Los Angeles, a récemment jeté de la lumière sur la question à l'aide de l'imagerie par résonance magnétique. Le chercheur a découvert que les régions du cerveau qui interviennent lorsque nous traitons l'information sur notre présent et notre futur ne sont pas les mêmes. Par contre, la partie du cerveau qui s'active lorsque nous nous projetons dans le futur est la même que celle qui s'active quand nous imaginons un étranger. Cette particularité étrange de notre réseau neuronal permet à notre moi présent de se sentir libre de satisfaire ses désirs immédiats aux dépens de notre moi futur, qui aura sans doute plus d'énergie et plus de temps que notre moi présent pour se dévouer à la tâche.

Selon M. Pychyl, mieux comprendre la neurobiologie du cerveau aidera les psychologues à mettre au point des stratégies pour lutter contre la procrastination. Entre-temps, ses collègues et lui tentent de cerner le type de personnes qui ont le plus tendance à procrastiner. Bien que ce problème touche toutes les professions, nationalités et catégories d'âge, il existe des constantes. En 2007, M. Steel a publié une analyse de près de 800 études sur la procrastination et défini quatre traits de caractère qui augmentent les risques de procrastination : une faible confiance en soi, une aversion à la tâche, un degré élevé de distractibilité et d'impulsivité, et une incapacité à fixer des objectifs réalistes et immédiats.

Les psychologues s'entendent mieux sur la prévalence de la procrastination dans le milieu universitaire – un phénomène endémique, selon eux. M. Pychyl ose même l'appeler « le problème numéro un dans le monde actuel de l'éducation ». Selon ses travaux de recherche, les étudiants qui procrastinent mettent plus de temps à rendre leurs devoirs, passent plus d'heures à travailler sur leurs projets et à étudier, cumulent plus de travaux inachevés et sont plus susceptibles de tricher et de plagier que leurs camarades assidus à la tâche. Ses travaux de recherche suggèrent aussi que ces procrastinateurs universitaires partagent certaines caractéristiques : le manque de confiance en eux et la croyance d'avoir peu de pouvoir sur leur réussite scolaire. ■