

Procrastination: Theoretical Background

What is procrastination?

The term “procrastination” refers to delaying tasks you consider as urgent or necessary and doing something else instead, the substitutional work having lower priority and being less essential. After doing so, people typically find excuses (Rückert, 2011). Not all delay, though, is procrastination. Delay is part of structuring and prioritizing, whereas procrastination is needless voluntary postponement of tasks undertaken in the knowledge that it may be harmful to yourself in regard to your performance or feelings.

How many students procrastinate?

Now and then almost everyone postpones aversive activities. A study shows that 80 to 95 % of all students procrastinate at one time or another within their lives and 75 % of them report to procrastinate with regard to their studies (Schouwenburg, Lay, Pychyl, & Ferrari, 2004). To a certain degree this can be considered as normal. But 20 to 40 % of students declare to have sincere troubles with procrastination (Schouwenburg et al., 2004).

Why do people procrastinate?

There are three things that influence the emergence of procrastination, as can be seen in figure 1. Firstly, there are certain **personality traits** (e.g. high impulsivity) that determine the vulnerability for procrastination. Some people are more seducible to procrastinate than others. Secondly, **self-regulation deficits** play an important role. They include little perseverance or deficient time management, but also gaps between one’s intention and action (Gerholz & Klingsieck, 2013). If you procrastinate and do other things instead, you might feel the reduction of tension or even success through handling something else. But in the long run, self-devaluation, negative feedback, and adverse feelings gain the upper hand (Höcker, 2013). Procrastination can consciously or subconsciously be motivated as an attempt to preserve self-respect or avoid conflict.

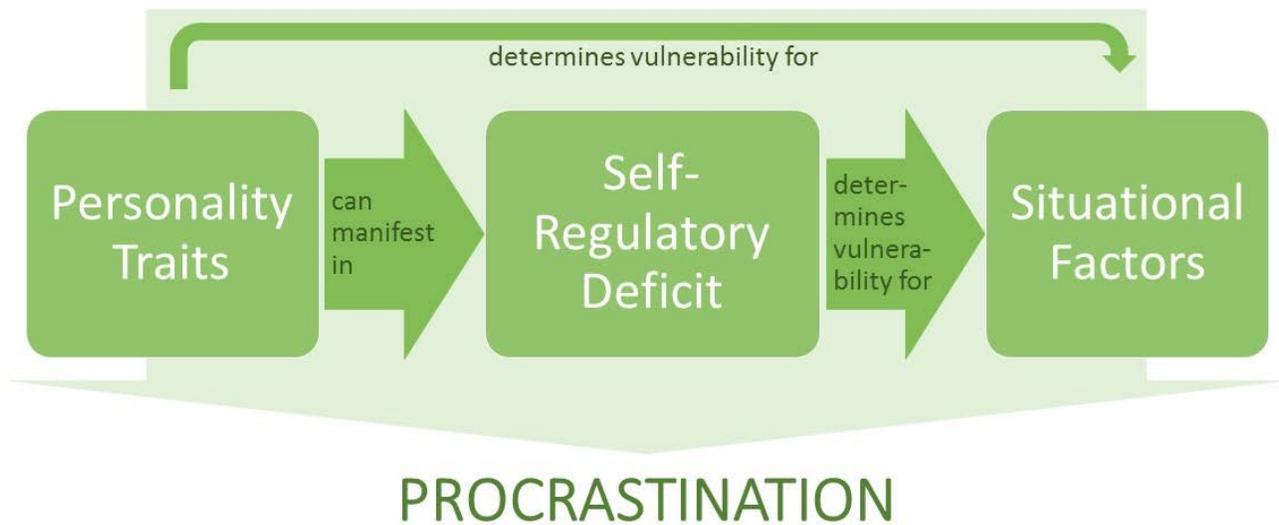


Figure 1. Emergence of procrastination adapted from Gerholz and Klingsieck (2013).

The third issue that contributes to procrastination concerns **situational factors** such as complexity, plausibility, structuralizing, and attractivity of a task, anticipated feedback, experienced autonomy, and social isolation (Gerholz & Klingsieck, 2013).

What are the consequences of procrastination?

Most studies of academic procrastination find that procrastination leads to lowered academic success, such as lower grades or lower performance on specific tasks (Ackerman & Gross, 2005). In the long run, procrastinators also display poorer health conditions and more frequent visits of health-care professionals than non-procrastinators. Furthermore, procrastinating students report higher stress levels (Tice & Baumeister, 1997) and feelings of shame (Fee & Tangney, 2000). The results show that procrastination comes with many negative aspects. To help students keep tendencies to procrastinate within bounds is desirable.

Research Findings: How can I help procrastinators in academic settings?

Current research findings suggest that there is less procrastination if the assignment attracts students' interest (Ackerman & Gross, 2005; Steel, 2007). This is possible through using actual and realistic problems, jobs that generate practical skills students can use in their professional life, or subjects of personal pertinence for the students. Moreover, the necessity to use a wide range of skills for finishing a task leads to more interest and greater motivation (Ackerman & Gross, 2005). Proposed by Paden and Steel (1997) incorporating interdependence of tasks prevents procrastination. Creating various interwoven subtasks or developing serial assignments, whereby the accomplishment of one is based on the previous one, can help to build up interdependence. Another way to decrease procrastination tendencies of students is to use some kind of reward for getting an early start, such as extra points or cheering comments (Ackerman & Gross, 2005).

Apart from this, procrastination can be reduced by designing assignments very concretely (McCrea, Liberman, Trope, & Sherman, 2008) as well as by setting proximate subgoals (Steel, 2007). In this context it is also important to note that implementation intentions, also called “if-then plans”, simplify the pursuance of goals (Gollwitzer, 1999). Such plans enable students to feel control in the situation and help to find opportunities to act more quickly. Another way to reduce procrastination is to provide very clear instructions (Acker & Gross, 2005). This can implicate handing out step-by-step instructions, providing the chance to get early on feedback and clarification of the task, or presenting examples (Ackerman & Gross, 2005).

If instructors notice that some of their students procrastinate, it is good and helpful to remind them of deadlines that are coming up because students like if instructors define clear standards and bring their expectations to mind (Ackermann & Gross, 2005).

Ressources

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