



Put Off Procrastinating!!

Module 3

Changing Procrastination

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Introduction

Hopefully, you are now starting to realise that procrastination is a more complex process than just being “lazy”. “Laziness” is far too simple an explanation. Now that we have analysed all the different aspects of your procrastination, let’s put them together in a cycle of how procrastination works. This will help you to truly understand what it is that you are doing when you procrastinate. It will also show us the clear path forward as to what needs to be done to overcome your procrastination. It is then important to take stock and reflect on whether you want to embark on the journey of changing this habit, and hence make a strong commitment to changing your procrastination.

The Procrastination Cycle

As has already been discussed in Modules 1 and 2, there are a lot of elements to procrastination. So let’s put them all together.

Task/Goal

Firstly, to start off procrastinating you need to approach a task or goal you have committed to which is a priority in your life. Approaching the task/goal may be in the form of just thinking about doing the task, planning to do the task or actually attempting the task. As we previously saw the task or goal could be from many different areas of your life, for example, work, household, study, health, financial, social, family, relationships, self-development, and decision making.

Unhelpful Rules/Assumptions

When you approach a task/goal either mentally or physically, one or more of your unhelpful rules and assumptions gets activated. These rules/assumptions could relate to needing to be in charge, pleasure seeking, fearing failure or disapproval, fearing uncertainty or catastrophe, low self-confidence or depleted energy. Once activated, these rules/assumptions start to guide how you think and feel about doing the task, making the task appear aversive to you, and hence arousing some form of discomfort about doing the task. For example, if your task is to do the household chores, and you have an unhelpful rule/assumption about pleasure seeking, you are going to think things like “fun should always come first, I don’t want to do these mundane things”, and you will feel bored and frustrated about doing the household chores.

Discomfort Driven

If you then **detect discomfort** in yourself when you approach or think about approaching a task or goal, it is going to make you less likely to want to do that task or goal. In addition, if you are also a person who can’t stand feeling uncomfortable, that is you can’t tolerate unpleasant feelings and **detest discomfort**, you are going to have even more problems with following through on the task. Your urge to avoid these feelings or **dodge discomfort** is going to build if you feel both uncomfortable about doing the task and hate these feelings of discomfort. Putting each of these things together means that overall you will be **discomfort driven**, that is, whether you follow through with a task will be heavily influenced by wanting to stop or avoid any discomfort you are experiencing about the task.



Procrastination Excuses

In addition to being discomfort driven, you will start to think of excuses that justify and make your procrastination OK in some way. You often pick out some truth about the situation, and conclude that you are better off doing the task at a later date. For example, “I am too tired, I am better off doing it tomorrow when I am rested”.

Procrastination Activities

The more discomfort driven you are and the more convincing your excuses are, the more likely you will actually procrastinate by engaging in other activities that divert your attention away from the task/goal at

hand. The types of procrastination activities you might use as a substitute are, pleasurable tasks, lower priority tasks, socialising, distractions, and daydreaming.

Positive Consequences

The positive consequences you may experience from procrastinating, such as relieving the initial discomfort you had about the task/goal, feeling good for having stuck with your rules and assumptions, and having gained some pleasure from the procrastination activities you carried out, will just strengthen your procrastination because it had a pay-off. As such, you will be more likely to procrastinate next time.

Negative Consequences



The negative consequences you may experience from procrastinating also make you more likely to procrastinate next time round, because they make the task/goal even more unpleasant for you and hence you will want to avoid it even more. These negative consequences may include, feeling more discomfort because you haven't achieved the task, keeping your unhelpful rules and assumptions intact because you haven't challenged them, criticising yourself as an attempt to motivate yourself which actually backfires and demotivates you, tasks piling up and with it more demands and time pressures, and possibly some sort of punishment or loss from your environment for not having done the task.

Putting It All Together

As you can see, at the end of the day procrastination is about needing to avoid some sort of discomfort about doing a task, that arises because of certain unhelpful rules and assumptions we hold about ourselves and how the world works. Also, if we are able to excuse our procrastination and feel it is justified, this makes it even more likely that we will procrastinate, rather than suffer through and tolerate the discomfort. And finally the pay-offs and costs that arise from our procrastination, just keep us stuck in this habit. We are more likely to procrastinate next time because we got both something good out of our procrastination, as well as made the task even more unpleasant by putting it off, hence compelling us to avoid it again.

See Page 4 for the **Procrastination Cycle**, which puts all the things just mentioned into a diagram for you to follow. You will also notice an **Example Procrastination Cycle** (Page 5) that you can follow, to help get your head around these ideas. Finally, you will also see a **Make Your Own Procrastination Cycle** (Page 6), which you can fill in for the task/goal you have decided to work on throughout these Modules, using some of the things you have already written down in Modules 1 & 2 to fill in the gaps.

What Stops People Procrastinating?

Having a look at the procrastination cycle, you may wonder what stops people procrastinating? I mean everyone faces tasks that are uncomfortable and that they would rather avoid. Also, what makes me procrastinate in certain areas of my life and not others? Or what makes me procrastinate at certain times and not others? The typical things that might stop someone from procrastinating are:

- They don't hold any of the unhelpful rules and assumptions we have discussed as being linked to procrastination. They may instead think things like: "things don't have to be all my way, and doing things I don't like or because others tell me is just a part of life"; "fun and achievement are equally important, some short term boredom for long term gain and later fun is the way to go"; "things don't have to be perfect, on the whole I do ok at things and people aren't out to judge me all the time"; "I can't know exactly how things will pan out, but better to take action than remain stuck, and I will be able to deal with any consequences that come my way"; "on the whole I can do things if I put my mind to it"; or "I can do things when my energy is low, it may take a bit more effort, but often I feel better".
- They may have rules and assumptions that focus on the importance of being a conscientious person, which may override any unhelpful rules or assumptions they may also have. For example, they may believe that "working towards achieving something will give me a sense of fulfilment".
- Any reward for completing the task or punishment for not completing the task that is large and closely follows the task (rather than being small or delayed), may make people persist despite their discomfort.
- They may feel uncomfortable about the task or goal, but if they don't detest discomfort, that is they believe they can tolerate discomfort if required, the urge to dodge the discomfort is not as great.
- They can't come up with good excuses to make them feel OK about procrastinating.

Put Off Procrastinating!!

Approach Task/Goal

E.g., Work, household, study, health, financial, social, family, relationships, self-development, decision making

One or more unhelpful rules/assumptions are activated (i.e., shoulds, musts & can'ts)...

Need To Be In Charge	Pleasure Seeking	Fear of Failure or Disapproval	Fear of Uncertainty or Catastrophe	Low Self-Confidence	Depleted Energy
"I <i>must</i> always call the shots. I <i>shouldn't</i> have to do things I don't want to, or just because someone else says so"	"Life's too short to be doing things that are boring or hard, fun <i>should</i> always come first"	"I <i>must</i> do things perfectly, otherwise I will fail or others will think badly of me"	"I <i>must</i> be certain of what will happen. What if it's bad? I am better off not doing anything than risking it"	"I <i>can't</i> do it. I am just too incapable and inadequate"	"I <i>can't</i> do things when I am stressed, fatigued, unmotivated, or depressed"

Discomfort Driven

Detect Discomfort
Discomfort about the task/goal builds
E.g., anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion



Detest Discomfort
"I can't stand these feelings!!!"



Dodge Discomfort
Urge to avoid discomfort by procrastinating on the task/goal builds



Procrastination Excuses

E.g., "I'm too tired, I'll do it tomorrow", "I don't have everything I need, I can't start now", "It is better to do it when I am in the mood", "I will miss out on fun, I can do it later", "I will do it once this is finished"

Procrastination Activities

E.g., pleasurable tasks, lower priority tasks, socialising, daydreaming, distractions

Positive Consequences

- Relieve initial discomfort about doing the Task/Goal
 - Feel better for sticking to unhelpful rules/assumptions
- Gain pleasure from procrastination activities

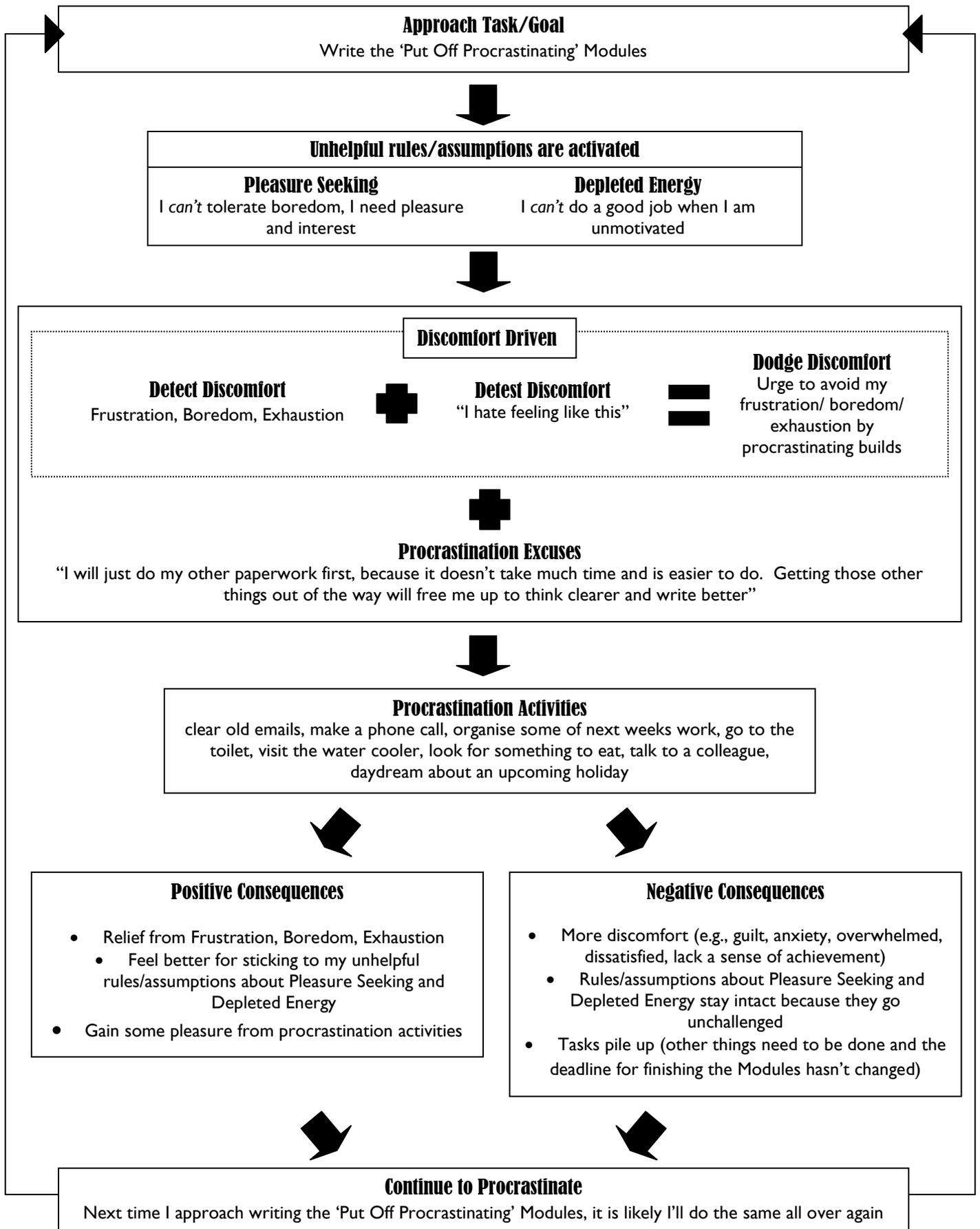
Negative Consequences

- More discomfort (e.g., guilt, shame, anxiety, despair)
- Unhelpful rules/assumptions stay intact because they go unchallenged
- Self-criticism is used as an attempt to motivate yourself, but this backfires and only demotivates you
- Tasks pile up (increased demands & time pressures)
 - Punishment or Loss

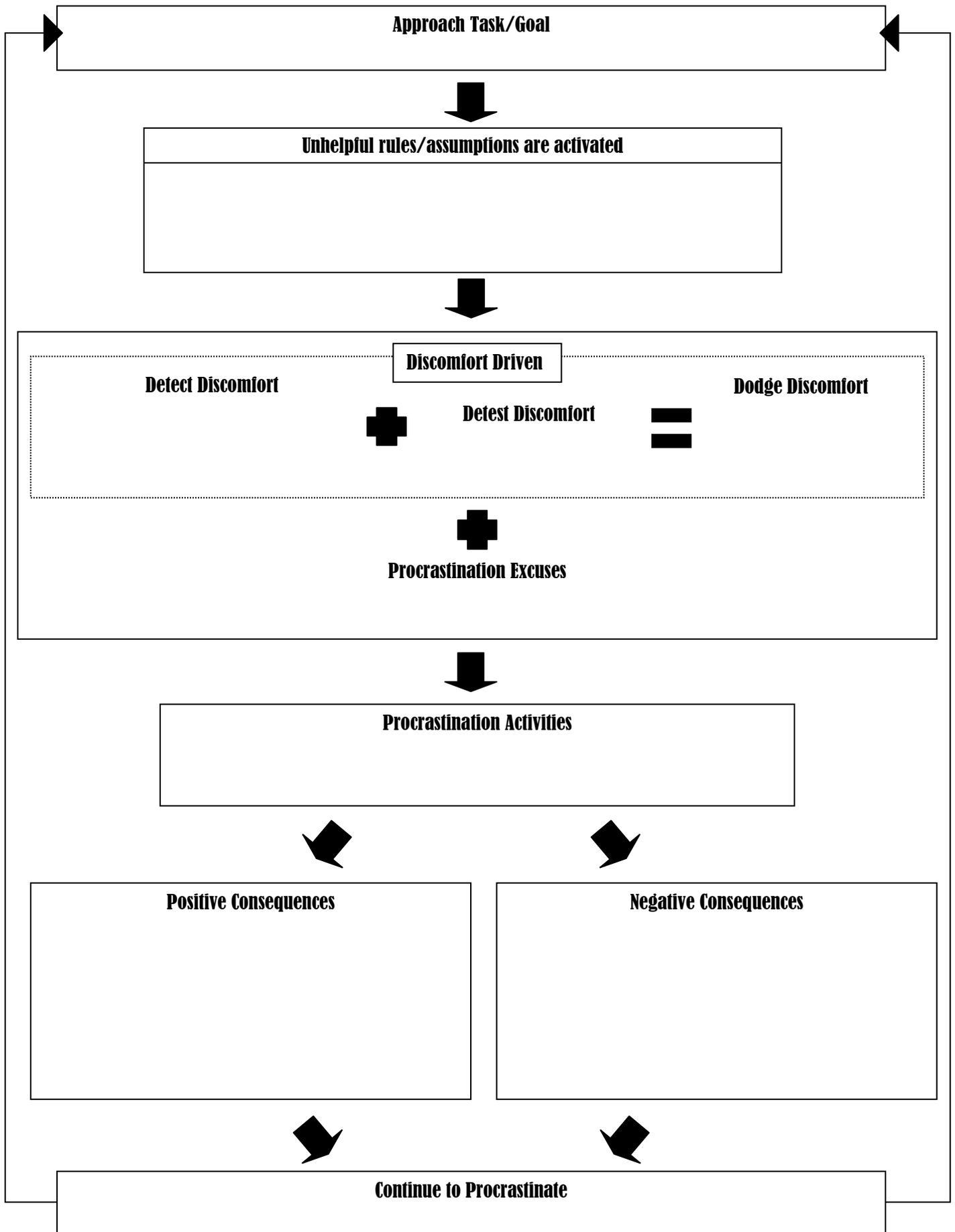
Continue to Procrastinate

Next time you approach the Task/Goal it is likely you'll do the same all over again

Example Procrastination Cycle:



Make Your Own Procrastination Cycle:



How Do I Change Procrastination?

Now that you understand exactly what goes on when you procrastinate, you may ask, “how do I change my procrastination?” and “what is it I need to do now?” The path to changing procrastination requires addressing three particular aspects of the procrastination cycle.



Dismissing Procrastination Excuses

Module 4 will take you through how to dismiss the excuses you come up with that make your procrastination OK to you. By addressing the excuses that make procrastination feel reasonable and justified, this will lessen the likelihood that you will procrastinate. Here we will also address the self-criticisms you use that demotivate yourself, finding more helpful ways to speak to yourself that are actually motivational.

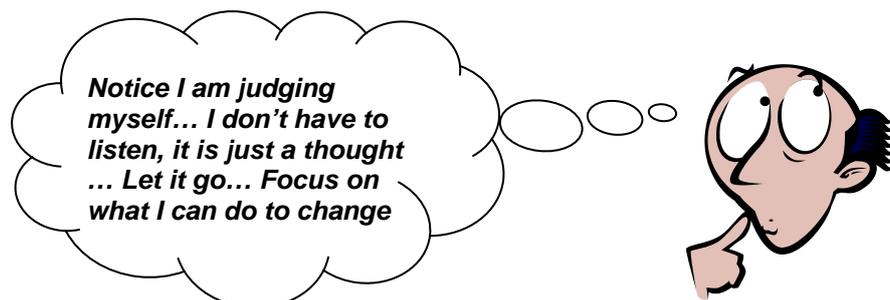
Practical Techniques To Stop Procrastination

Module 5 will take you through practical behavioural strategies to help you stop your procrastination activities and start doing. We will outline a variety of techniques you can try, some of which you will find helpful, others of which may not be right for you. Also, some techniques will be relevant to certain situations, but not others. The idea is that you will have a smorgasbord of things you can try, and with some trial and error, you will be able to work out which techniques work for you.

Adjusting Unhelpful Rules/Assumptions & Tolerating Discomfort

Module 6 will take you through tips you can use to address the unhelpful rules/assumptions and discomfort intolerance, that give rise to your procrastination. Trying to change unhelpful rules/assumptions and increase your tolerance of discomfort can be hard. As such, this section will only provide you with tips for getting started on making these changes to your beliefs about yourself and the world. These tips may be enough if your beliefs are not particularly strong. However, if they are strong and longstanding you may require more intensive work with a mental health professional who specialises in cognitive-behavioural therapy. Remember, we have said before that you don't necessarily need to change your rules and assumptions to overcome procrastination. Focusing on the strategies from Modules 4 & 5 can often be enough to change the habit.

Remember, you have already taken the first step to overcoming procrastination by becoming more **aware** and recognising your procrastination. From what we have done so far, you have been able to stop and reflect on what it is you do when you procrastinate, rather than letting it continue on as an automatic habit. Another step before you start practicing the strategies you will read about in Modules 4, 5 and 6 is **acceptance**. You need to recognise that procrastination is a normal human behaviour. We know from our discussion of the negative consequences of procrastination, that judging yourself for procrastinating and feeling guilty and ashamed, just demotivates you and makes your tasks and goals even more aversive, and hence makes you more likely to procrastinate. Instead you need to adopt a non-judgemental attitude towards your procrastination. So rather than telling yourself “I shouldn't procrastinate, doing so makes me a lazy good for nothing person”, you may instead take a more accepting attitude that “everyone procrastinates, it is something I would prefer not to do as it is not helping my life, and so I will turn my focus to committing to changing this habit as best I can”. From now on when you notice judging, blaming, guilty or shameful thoughts about your procrastination, try to see them as just thoughts (not facts). Acknowledge that these thoughts don't help you, you don't need to buy into them or listen to them, and just let them go by focusing instead on what you can do to change and make your situation better.



Do I Want To Change?

So now you know what is in store in order to change your procrastination. It is always helpful before you embark on the journey of change to ask yourself the questions: “How much do I want to change?”; “Do I just want to talk and think about the problem, or do I want to do something about it?”; “Do I want to put in the effort required to make changes in my life?”; and “Do I want to start doing things differently?”

There is an old saying that, “if you always do what you’ve always done, you will always get what you’ve always got”. Change involves doing things differently, and that can be hard, so the question is:

“Are you willing to commit to change now?” **YES** **NO**

To help you weigh up how much you do want to change, it can be helpful to consider the following.

- Being a procrastinator, what do I get out of it that is negative? What are the disadvantages? How does it hurt me?
- Being a procrastinator, what do I get out of it that is positive? What are the advantages? How does it help me?
- If I do change and no longer procrastinate, what will be good about that? How will my life be better? What will be the benefits of change for me?
- If I do change and no longer procrastinate, what will be bad about that? What will I have to give up? What will be the costs of change for me?

Being a procrastinator...	
How does it hurt me?	How does it help me?
If I change and no longer procrastinate...	
What will be good?	What will be bad?

Put Off Procrastinating!!

Hopefully the hurt procrastination brings you and the good you think will come from changing, outweighs how much procrastination helps you and the bad you think will come from changing. During the times that it is hard to stick with your commitment to changing your procrastination habit, reflect on the ways procrastination hurts you and the good things you expect from change, as a way of motivating yourself to keep going and stay on track.

However, if the ways procrastination helps you and the bad things you anticipate from changing are winning out at the moment, it is going to make a lot of sense that changing this habit will be particularly difficult, and you may not be ready for the process. You may need to give it some more thought and think of ways you can overcome these obstacles. See below for an example of what you might do to overcome the obstacles standing in between you and changing your procrastination habit. Use the columns below to work through your roadblocks (i.e., the things identified above in the 'how does it help me?' and 'what will be bad?' boxes). For each roadblock think of the types of things you may need to say to yourself (i.e., self-talk) and types of things you can do (i.e., actions) to overcome these obstacles and embark on the journey of changing your procrastination.

 Roadblocks	 Self-talk	 Actions
<p><i>Example: Changing my procrastination habit will mean people will expect more from me, there will be more pressure and responsibility on me to do things</i></p>	<p><i>Example: I can choose what things I want to commit to and what things I don't. I can build up gradually to doing more things. People aren't going to change their expectations of me overnight.</i></p>	<p><i>Example: Keep going with doing, rather than putting off. If someone puts pressure on me to commit to something I am not ready for yet, talk to them about it.</i></p>
<p><i>Example: By following through on tasks I will now have to deal with my work being criticised.</i></p>	<p><i>Example: Not every bit of feedback I get will be a criticism. Constructive criticism is important, and is the only way to improve at something. Other people handle it - so can I.</i></p>	<p><i>Example: Tell a friend I am working on overcoming my procrastination so they can help me. When I do get some criticism, talk it over with the friend to help me put it in perspective.</i></p>

Module Summary

- The cycle of procrastination involves the following steps: approaching a task/goal → activates unhelpful rules and assumptions → this generates discomfort about the task/goal → then if you hate discomfort your urge to avoid the discomfort by procrastinating will increase, plus if you find good excuses for not doing the task → then you will engage in procrastination activities as a substitute or diversion → which then leads to positive and negative consequences → which just increases the likelihood that you will procrastinate next time around.
- To change the procrastination habit you need to learn ways to dismiss procrastination excuses, learn practical techniques to stop procrastination activities, and learn tips for adjusting unhelpful rules/assumptions and tolerating discomfort.
- The first step to changing procrastination is being aware of what you are doing and adopting an accepting and non-judgemental attitude towards your procrastination. Blaming and judging yourself just makes things worse.
- Committing to changing your procrastination is important. Changing any habit can be hard and challenging, so you need to be motivated to stick with it. You can do this by reminding yourself of the ways procrastination hurts you and what will be good about changing your procrastination. You can also prepare for the obstacles that might get in the way of change.



Coming up next ...

In the next module you will learn how to dismiss your procrastination excuses, and how to be less self-critical and more encouraging towards yourself.

About The Modules

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BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in these modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT for procrastination is based on the approach that procrastination is a result of problematic cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours.

REFERENCES

These are some of the professional references used to create the modules in this information package.

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