

Psychology of Procrastination: Why People Put Off Important Tasks Until the Last Minute

Five questions for Joseph Ferrari, PhD



Joseph Ferrari, PhD, is a professor of psychology and Vincent dePaul Distinguished Professor at DePaul University in Chicago. He is a leading international researcher in the study of procrastination and is the lab director of DePaul's Center for Social, Personality and Community Research. He has published numerous articles and books on procrastination and counseling procrastinators in academic settings. His latest book, "Still Procrastinating: The No Regret Guide to Getting It Done," will be released later this year. With April 15 right around the corner, the American Psychological Association spoke to Dr. Ferrari about why some people put things off

— such as filing their taxes — until the last minute.

APA. Americans like to think of themselves as active, can-do people who grab opportunities and solve problems. As you have studied procrastination during your career, would you say that's an accurate self-image or do Americans as a culture tend to put things off until the last minute?

Dr. Ferrari. One of my favorite sayings is, "Everyone procrastinates, but not everyone is a procrastinator." We all put tasks off, but my research has found that 20 percent of U.S. men and women are chronic procrastinators. They delay at home, work, school and in relationships. These 20 percent make procrastination their way of life, so of course they procrastinate when filing their income taxes. We are a nation of "doers" but we are also, like people from other industrialized nations, a people of "waiters."

Let's place the 20 percent in perspective – that's higher than the number of people diagnosed with clinical depression or phobias, two tendencies many people know about.

Within the United States, we conducted a study of the Northeast, Southeast, Northwest and Southwest. The sample size was small but we found chronic procrastination rates higher in the Northwest – northern California, Washington, Oregon – than in other areas of the country. Again, it was a small sample size but the implications are appealing.

Non-procrastinators focus on the task that needs to be done. They have a stronger personal identity and are less concerned about what psychologists call "social esteem" – how others like us – as opposed to self-esteem which is how we feel about ourselves.

APA. Have the immediacies of modern technology helped reduce our procrastination or do they feed into people's tendency to put things off?

Dr. Ferrari. Good point. We hear that technology today makes it easier to procrastinate. Well, in 2006, a reporter phoned me and asked what I thought of the snooze button, which is more than 50 years old. The snooze button is one of the first technologies designed to give us more time, yet we have not gained anything. We still delay.

Today's technology can help us not procrastinate if we use it wisely. We don't have to surf the Web for hours on irrelevant tasks. We can get systems that time us out after 10 minutes. We don't have to have a Blackberry with us at all times. Use technology as a tool, not as a means of delay.

APA. What are the personality differences between people who dive in and get things done compared to those who look for every reason to avoid completing tasks? And while procrastination isn't a disorder per se, is it a sign of other problems that can become true disorders if not confronted?

Dr. Ferrari. If you find that you procrastinate so often, in all areas of your life as I mentioned before, then this is a problem. We have found some links with chronic procrastination and personality challenges like ADHD, passive-aggressive tendencies, revenge, obsessive-compulsive disorder and other areas that I cover in my new book. But let's remember that while everyone puts off an occasional task, it is the person who does that habitually, always with plausible "excuses" that has issues to address.

We don't view procrastination as a serious problem but as a common tendency to be lazy or dawdling. But we have shown in our research it is much, much more. For those chronic procrastinators, it is not a time management issue – it is a maladaptive lifestyle.

APA. You offer suggestions in your published works of how to help the chronic procrastinator. What are some simple things society can do to change procrastinators' ways?

Dr. Ferrari. Let me give you one suggestion focusing on tax returns:

Most U.S. post offices stay open later on April 15th. What is wrong with that picture? We are accommodating people who procrastinate. I think we have our priorities backwards. We should be celebrating the person who filed on February 15th or March 15th. In fact, if we want to stimulate the government with resources, there should be incentives for filing early. Perhaps, there can be a reduction, say 3 percent, off what is owed for those who file on February 15th. The government gets their funds two months early and the filer saves a little money. Instead, we punish for filing after April 15th. I say, reward for getting it done early.

APA. Is there a line between procrastination and giving something enough thought before diving in – in other words, when combating procrastination, do we jeopardize the act of contemplation?

Dr. Ferrari. One area of research we focus on is indecision – purposely waiting to make a decision. We explored why some people find it so hard to make decisions. Sure, gathering resources and information is productive and useful but some people seem to be unable to make decisions – these are the serious procrastinators. They let others decide for them, so there is no blame for failure attributed to them. Procrastination is not waiting and it is more than delaying. It is a decision to not act. It is very helpful and useful to gather information to make an informed decision, but when one simply continues to gather beyond the point of adequate resources, then they are being indecisive and the waiting is counterproductive. Let's live life now and enjoy our lives. Don't delay because of fears or insecurities.

The American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C., is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world's largest association of psychologists.