

Clever Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get Stuff Done

by Kim Tranell on September 10, 2013 in Life Skills

What's *your* time waster of choice? Silly cat videos? Your Facebook feed? Salacious celeb gossip? (I'm quite partial chats and [adorable chimp photos](#), thank you very much.) As we all know, teens—like adults—struggle with procrastination, maybe even more so than we do.

Because, while technology is tough for all of us to ignore, FOMO-factor (that is: "fear of missing out") feels extra intense during the middle and high school years. Teens aren't just dealing with dread of the task at hand, but also downright terror that they'll lose out on something that will threaten their social status in an end-of-the-world type of way. (It may sound silly and dramatic and irrational to us—but for them, it's a very real feeling.)

So, as school swings into serious gear in the coming weeks, it's the perfect time to talk about procrastination with your students—not in an accusatory, lecture-y way, of course, but as a very real two-sided discussion about the challenges of focusing on the work they have to do this year. How does procrastination affect their homework? Why is it so hard to turn off their phone? What do they do to ignore distraction? Hopefully, you'll help them realize some of the subconscious barriers they're up against, and you'll all walk away with some good advice on what I would consider *th*emost important life skill: Getting. Stuff. Done.

But in the meantime? Here are a few tips that have worked for me, or that science says should be helpful. Hopefully they'll serve as conversation starters...

How to Stop Procrastinating

1. **Trick yourself into starting.** Tell yourself you *only* have to study the first two pages of your history notes now, or you simply have to write the introduction paragraph of your book report. Chances are, you'll read another page, and write another paragraph...and so on. This is advice I've learned from years and years of researching and writing about exercise motivation, and honestly, it almost never fails. The gist of the psychology behind it is this: The dread that drives procrastination is almost always exaggerated. Once we provide our brains with "evidence" that it's not that bad (i.e. we actually start what we dread), we overcome it.



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2. **Try the 25/5 rule.** It's a biological fact that short, frequent breaks can keep our brain fresh and focused, but they need to be guided by some sort of structure. Otherwise, what's keeping us from getting days-deep into our Facebook feed? That's where the 25/5 rule comes in: Tell yourself you'll focus fully for 25 minutes, then reward yourself with a 5-minute break, during which you can binge on your preferred mode of procrastination. I like this little trick because 25 minutes feels doable, so you race toward your goal—and your output almost always surprises you. Tell teens to give it a go just once and see what they think. They can even use [this online timer](#). (And afterwards, ask them: Wasn't it more fun to check Instagram when there were 30 new photos waiting for them...instead of refreshing again and again when nothing new popped up?)

3. **There's a cool app for that. Use it.** For those who feel they seriously lack self-control, you can suggest that they ask Mom or Dad for 10 bucks to install [Freedom](#) on their computer. The program allows you to set a time period ranging from 45 minutes to 8 hours, during which you're locked away from the Internet. There are also apps or settings that can eliminate phone distractions. For example, I always flip my iPhone into "Do Not Disturb" mode (under Settings)—where it won't push any sort of notification through—before I get to work. Sure, I could always switch it back. But without hearing any pings, I'm more likely to forget about what I'm missing.