

H1: Why You Keep Putting Things Off When You're Overwhelmed

Meta Title: Why You Keep Putting Things Off When You're Overwhelmed

Meta Description: Feeling overwhelmed and still can't start the task in front of you? Learn why procrastination can be linked to stress, avoidance, and emotional overload, plus a few gentle ways to break the cycle.

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You know the task matters. You know it needs to get done. But instead of starting, you check your email again, tidy something unimportant, or stare at your device's screen. If that sounds familiar, it doesn't mean you're lazy or bad at managing your time. **In many cases, procrastination has more to do with overwhelm than discipline.**

The American Psychological Association (APA) notes that procrastination is closely tied to emotion regulation, not just planning or productivity habits. That matters because procrastination can look like a discipline problem from the outside, even when something more complicated is going on underneath.

Why Procrastination Is Really Overwhelm

When you're overwhelmed, even simple tasks can feel heavier than they should. A form that normally takes ten minutes can suddenly feel impossible to begin. Paying a bill is harder than it should. A phone call can feel like too much. Stress can affect your thoughts, feelings, and behavior, which helps explain why everyday responsibilities can start to feel unmanageable.

That's part of what makes this pattern so frustrating. From the outside, it may look like procrastination. From the inside, it can feel more like freezing, shutting down, or trying to get away from one more thing you just can't handle. For some people, this kind of reaction can be part of the body's fight, flight or freeze response.

One reason this happens is that avoidance can bring short-term relief. If a project feels stressful, unclear, emotionally loaded, or tied to fear of failure, putting it off can briefly reduce that discomfort. **The problem is that the relief usually doesn't last.** The task is still there, but now it may feel even more intimidating because guilt and urgency have been added on top. People often delay responsibilities not because they don't care, but because they're trying to escape the uncomfortable feelings attached to them.

How Procrastination Can Show Up Day to Day

Procrastination can show up in very ordinary ways. You may find yourself doing easy, low-stakes tasks while the important thing keeps getting put off. You might delay a phone call or appointment you know you need to

make. You may keep “getting ready” to start a job without ever starting it. And you may feel guilty all day and still end it with nothing meaningful crossed off.

On their own, these moments may seem minor. But together, they can create a frustrating pattern. The APA describes procrastination as a way people cope with difficult emotions in the moment, even when that delay creates more problems later.

That’s part of what can make this pattern hard to spot. You may still be doing things, checking things off, and moving through the day. But the responsibility that matters most keeps getting pushed aside.

What Procrastination Can Look Like

- Doing easy, low-stakes tasks first
- Delaying a phone call you really need to make
- “Getting ready” to start without actually starting
- Feeling guilty all day
- Ending the day with nothing meaningful crossed off
- Staying busy while the most important project keeps getting brushed off

Why Tasks Feel So Hard to Start

Sometimes the task feels too big. Sometimes it’s too vague. Sometimes there are too many decisions packed into the first step. And sometimes perfectionism raises the pressure so much that starting feels harder than the project itself.

Tasks can be hard to start when the first step isn’t clear. If you’re not sure where to begin, what to prioritize, or what “done” is supposed to look like, the responsibility can start to feel bigger than it really is. In that situation, procrastination is sometimes less about the task itself and more about the friction built into starting it.

If the job feels important, you may start telling yourself it has to be done the right way, in the right mindset, with enough time, focus, and without mistakes. That can turn one task into a much bigger mental hurdle. **The more pressure attached to getting it right, the easier it becomes to delay getting started.**

Gentle Ways to Break the Cycle

Breaking the cycle doesn’t always require a big change. Sometimes it starts with making the task smaller. Instead of “finish the report,” the first step might be “open the document” or “write two lines.” Instead of “deal with the paperwork,” it might be “find the form and put it on the table.” [The National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\) recommends coping tools such as breaking problems into smaller parts and leaning on healthy routines and support when stress feels high.](#)

It also helps to lower the pressure around how the project gets done. **It doesn’t need to be completed perfectly to count as progress.** Setting a short timer, choosing one starting point, or asking someone to help you stay accountable can be enough to shift you out of the stuck feeling. The Mayo Clinic also recommends practical stress-management habits, including getting support, noticing stress signals, and using healthy coping strategies instead of letting stress build unchecked.

Just as important, **try not to turn the struggle into a character judgment.** If you're overwhelmed, calling yourself lazy, careless, or hopeless usually adds shame without making action easier. A more useful question is: What's making this task so hard to face right now? That exploration can make it easier to respond with curiosity instead of criticism. Experts on procrastination emphasize that self-criticism tends to keep people stuck, while more realistic and compassionate responses can support change.

Ways to Break the Cycle

- Make the project smaller
- Focus on the first step
- Lower the pressure
- Set a short timer
- Ask for support or accountability
- Respond with curiosity, not self-criticism

When It's Time to Reach Out for Support

Sometimes, this pattern is a sign that extra support could help. If you keep getting stuck in the same cycle or daily responsibilities are starting to slip, it may be time to look at what's driving the pattern. If stress and avoidance are affecting your work, relationships, sleep, or ability to function, talking with a mental health professional may help.

Reaching out doesn't mean things have to be at a crisis point. Sometimes support is most helpful when you've just noticed the pattern, but before it gets harder to manage. [NIMH says that when stress or anxiety begins to interfere with everyday life, reaching out for professional support may help.](#)

What to Remember

If this pattern feels familiar, you're not alone. Getting stuck doesn't automatically mean you're unmotivated, careless, or bad at managing your time. Sometimes it means something is getting in the way, and it may be worth paying closer attention to what that is. **If you keep finding yourself in the same cycle, XYZ Counseling can help you better understand what's behind it** and find more manageable ways forward.

References

- American Psychological Association. *Speaking of Psychology: Why We Procrastinate and What to Do About It.*
- National Institute of Mental Health. *I'm So Stressed Out! Fact Sheet.*
- Mayo Clinic. *Stress Symptoms: Effects on Your Body and Behavior.*