Procrastination

Putting things off

Procrastination is basically when we put important things off. It involves doing lower-priority tasks, instead of the higher-priority tasks that we intended to do. Procrastination is particularly common among university students. It's not because people are lazy, or that they can't do the work. Rather, there are environmental factors that make students vulnerable to procrastination. The unstructured and unsupervised time spent studying often means that there are fewer incentives to get work done. It is easier to put it off.
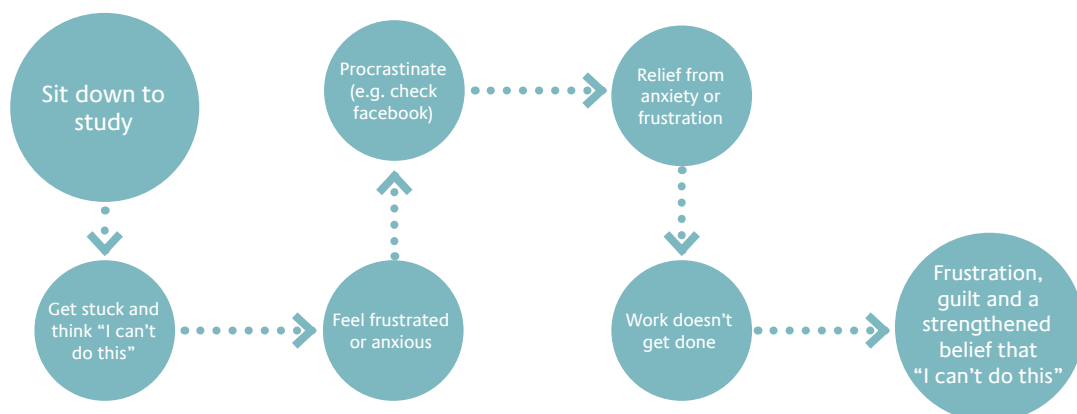
What happens when people procrastinate?

They do tasks that are a lower priority – this may be looking on the internet, watching TV, online shopping or lying on the couch. People may not really even enjoy the tasks they procrastinate with, but sometimes doing the dishes is easier than starting on that essay!

Procrastination feels good – at least in the short term. People often repeat their procrastination because it provides relief from stress and boredom. This pattern can be seen in the diagram below.

There are short-term rewards to procrastination, but unfortunately also unwanted consequences such as falling behind with work, and feelings such as guilt, anxiety and frustration.

Sometimes procrastination can occur when we don't have enough knowledge or skills. For example, if you are really struggling with starting your essay, is it because you are unsure about how to incorporate references? In some cases, it is important to seek help to overcome this obstacle. If you know what you're doing, it'll be easier to get started.

Sit down to study → Get stuck and think "I can't do this" → Feel frustrated or anxious → Procrastinate (e.g. check facebook) → Relief from anxiety or frustration → Work doesn't get done → Frustration, guilt and a strengthened belief that "I can't do this"

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There are other times when people know how to do something, but they put it off anyway. Before procrastinating, people often start thinking in ways that set themselves up for procrastination. You could refer to this as making procrastination excuses. Some examples include "I'm too tired, I need to have a break" or "I really need to pay that bill right now" or "I should get some more references before I start writing". Sometimes these excuses will be valid, but often they are procrastination excuses.

What can I do about it?

Procrastination is very common and is often an ongoing challenge for students. There are a couple of strategies for overcoming procrastination.

First, when these procrastination excuses come up (and they will), challenge your way of thinking. Really ask yourself if the reason to take a break is a real reason or if it is just a procrastination excuse. For example:

I can't do this I'm stuck	Vs	It is hard, but I will try for another 20 minutes
I need to do more reading first	Vs	I will write this first paragraph before doing more reading
I should call Ebony	Vs	I'll plan that for after lunch
My inspiration just isn't there today	Vs	I can get part of this done, even though my inspiration isn't at its highest

Changing your study environment, and making a few changes to your time management can also reduce procrastination. Try these tips:

- Remove procrastination tempters (e.g. put your phone in another room)
- Set a timer (don't stop working until a set time has elapsed)
- Do bigger tasks when you have a larger chunk of time (and save emails and editing until you have smaller chunks of time)
- Set rewards for yourself (e.g. check Facebook after writing your first page)
- Break down bigger tasks into smaller goals to keep motivated (e.g. plan the structure of your essay rather than trying to write the whole thing).

Still having troubles?

Come and speak to one of our counsellors. Sometimes other problems can be related to procrastination such as poor sleep, anxiety and depressed mood.

Where are we?

The main Counselling centre is at the South Street Campus on Bush Court. We also have some counselling available at Peel.

Email for all campuses:
counsellingservice@murdoch.edu.au

South Street Campus

Social Sciences Building 440 (Bush Court)
Phone: (08) 9360 1227
Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm

Peel Campus Student Centre

Phone: (08) 9582 5501
Hours: 8.30am – 4.30pm