

Why we put off dealing with procrastination

You tell yourself it can wait until tomorrow — that you work best under pressure. That's a lie. Procrastination is self-sabotage, researchers say, and it's easier to correct than you think.

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Robin Chenoweth: Procrastinators occupy a special space in the universe. Sometimes, it's a harried space. It has a knock it out, back against the wall, now or never type of vibe. And for me personally, running behind schedule actually has a soundtrack. It plays to the tune of the abridged version of Edvard Grieg's Norwegian Piano Concerto. That's because I come from a family of procrastinators. All except for my mom, who loved to call the rest of us

Karen Conrad: The last-minute Bennetts.

Robin Chenoweth: The last-minute Bennetts. Mom very often found herself ready to go to church or a family gathering — but waiting on my father, brother, sister and me.

Karen Conrad: I wasn't mad. I just was frustrated and outnumbered.

Robin Chenoweth: And so, she, a piano teacher, would sit down at the ivories.

[Norwegian Concerto]

Robin Chenoweth: Those first, crashing notes were a signal to us all. We had exactly three minutes 15 seconds and 72 measures before she finished the first movement and started to call out. I'm not going to lie. The music still stiffens my spine, and makes me think of hot rollers, mismatched shoes and trying to jump the last five steps while wearing a pencil skirt. As it turns out, I'm not at all alone. On college campuses, in middle schools and office complexes, on baseball diamonds and at wedding ceremonies, procrastinators are waiting until the very last minute to do something. But as with a number of life's more exasperating problems, researchers and educators at The Ohio State University have come up with some very sound science-based solutions to help us all. If you are one of us, or live, teach or work with a procrastinator, stay with us. This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

A procrastinator can always recognize that same tendency in the people around them. We found a few folks around campus with stories about how they or people they know wait too long to do the things they need to do.

Teghpreet Singh: Right now, I am putting off two courses that I need to do online and I'm watching The Office episodes, right now. So maybe I am procrastinating.

Robin Chenoweth: Indeed, actor Rainn Wilson was sauntering across this man's laptop screen.

Teghpreet Singh: I'm like, okay, if the deadline is 12, I'll just maybe start at 10 p.m. and submit it at 11:58.

Dustin Broderick: During school, I kind of procrastinated at night I kind of dug myself into this hole.... I'd wake up at four and get everything done before the day started. Probably wasn't good for my health. Probably didn't, you know, get me the highest grades.

Tyler Leonhart: If I had a soccer game that day, and I had to be there at 3:30, I wouldn't get ready for the game until 3:20 or 3:15. And it's that anxiety for 15 minutes of getting ready. I don't know if I enjoyed that feeling or if that was just my daily dose of chaos.

Sabrina Blocker: Laundry, housework, anything involving domesticated stuff I try to do it on Sundays, and like reset, but I always wait until the very last minute and then I don't get it all done And I hate that for me.

Chris Turner: I wrestled in high school. And my weight class was 152. And the day before the meet I was almost 160 pounds. So, I had to put on like two or three different sets of sweats and I worked out for about three or four hours Really sweating it out And I killed myself just to get to exactly 152 the next day.

Stacey Dorr: I was in a band with another singer She was classically late, probably between 15 and 30 minutes late And when she would pick me up, she had a stick shift car and she was in the process of eating dinner, putting on her makeup, putting on her jewelry, and driving us to the gig. So, she would tell me at stoplights, hold my burrito so that I can put on my eyeliner. And can you find me some earrings in my jewelry case? Oh, and did I mention she also had a Pepsi between her legs? Because it's true.

Robin Chenoweth: Before you judge, you should know that to some degree, this is a universal trait. Even researchers who study procrastination find themselves doing it.

Chris Wolters: I'm procrastinating right now on calling a roofing guy.

Robin Chenoweth: That's Chris Wolters, director of Ohio State's Walter E. Dennis Learning Center, which teaches courses and provides coaching to help students study smarter. A professor of educational psychology, Wolters who has researched motivation and self-regulated learning, especially how procrastination can sabotage student achievement. And right now, he's putting off getting a new roof.

Chris Wolters: I've had a leak in one of the rooms for a while. And I need to get somebody out to look at it. I know I do. But calling around, getting all these estimates, being at home when they go to look around at it...

Robin Chenoweth: And then paying for it, too, right? You got to pay for it.

Chris Wolters: Just that overall sense that, oh, I just wish I didn't have to do this. It's so overwhelming. It's like, you know what? It's not raining right now, so I don't have to deal with it, right?

Robin Chenoweth: Wolters knows full well the avoidance tactics that are playing out in his head. His research helped uncover them and a lot of other reasons why we procrastinate. Take the leaky roof, or the term paper in a subject you don't like, or doing taxes.

Chris Wolters: When people think of tasks as aversive, as unfun, as, you know, boring or difficult, or just not very interesting, that sort of motivational stance makes it more likely that they will procrastinate on those activities or those tasks It's also interesting, if you talk to people and get an idea about what they do instead of the tasks that they're procrastinating on. You can easily find examples where they're doing things that other people find aversive, right? So, a pretty classic example is a procrastinator's house is really clean and neat, right?

Robin Chenoweth: (Laughs)

Chris Wolters: They need to paint the house or they need to do work for their job. Or, you know, the student that has a really clean apartment, because they'd rather clean their apartment than write that paper or study for that exam.

Robin Chenoweth: So, it's not just about seeking pleasure — the trending Netflix miniseries that you watch to the last episode. But for some people it might be more about avoiding pain. Research shows there are some deep and complex issues behind why people procrastinate. One of them? Anxiety.

Chris Wolters: Some people are more anxious than others. And anxiety level is important when it comes to procrastination. Because when you think about procrastination, when you think about trying to get something done, and worrying about not being able to finish it successfully, you're sort of triggering this anxiety, and people that get anxious more easily, or aren't as able to manage that anxiety, are more likely to procrastinate.

Robin Chenoweth: As a matter of fact, many researchers think it's not really procrastination at all unless anxiety is present. Is any of this striking a chord? Meet recent graduate Tyler Leonhart, who last spring took a Dennis Learning Center course on procrastination to complete his master's in social work.

Tyler Leonhart: I would say my relationship with procrastination is a direct parallel to my relationship with anxiety. And I would say the more procrastination existed in my life, the more anxiety was present. And it was a direct correlation. My whole academic career, I would complete paperwork, I would get all of my work done. But it was done at the very last minute. And that's just been something that's taken place my whole life.

Robin with Tyler: Did you put off and put off doing the coursework? And then would try to cram to get it all done? Is that what you were doing?

Tyler Leonhart: Oh, yeah. I even use many defense mechanisms and rationalize and justify and my reasoning for why I wouldn't do it on time and said I would complete or have better work if I was under pressure. That was my excuse.

Robin Chenoweth: Yeah, is there some kind of addiction to that adrenaline? I wonder that, too.

Tyler Leonhart: Yeah, I don't know if I was lying to myself. Because I, I surely didn't like the long-term effects ... it led to forgetfulness that led to calling my mom and saying, "Hey, can you bring this?" Or calling my friend and say, "Hey, can you let this person know I'm running late?" It just, it's not sustainable. And it wasn't, it didn't feel good.

Robin Chenoweth: Lauren Hensley is senior associate director of the Dennis Learning Center. She developed and teaches the 7-week course on overcoming procrastination that Tyler

Leonhart took. She also leads workshops for professional groups and other classes that include strategies for avoiding procrastination.

Lauren Hensley: I would say that most people procrastinate in some area of their life. And even if they're not procrastinating on academics or work, it might be something social or calling the doctor paying a bill. And with all those pieces, they look really similar if you get down to those underlying causes.

Robin Chenoweth: How much does it have to do with people feeling like they're just not up to the task?

Lauren Hensley: I think low self-efficacy tends to be a pretty common reason that people will put off their tasks but it has different faces. Sometimes it's, I don't think I can be successful at this. But other times, it's, I don't think this can be perfect, and it has to be perfect. Or, I haven't faced my fear of failure.

Robin Chenoweth: It sounds like a perfectionist might also be a procrastinator. Is that true?

Lauren Hensley: Yes, perfectionism and procrastination definitely go hand in hand Because there's so much pressure and discomfort associated with it having to be perfect and what it says about you if it isn't, that folks will again, just put things off to have that temporary sense of relief Other times, it's in terms of the labels that we use. So, things like, I'm a bad writer, or I'm bad at math. And that identity is so uncomfortable for me that I'm just not even going to try to engage. So, I do think self-efficacy can, for many folks, cause them to put things off. And the challenge there is, what it's demonstrating is that people actually really do care about what it is that they're working on. So, for instance, maybe a graduate student who has chosen this field because it's their great life's passion, right? But because it means so much to them, there's also so much fear wrapped up in it, what if I don't do as well as I want to? And so even though it is self-sabotaging, in a sense, that same person might decide I'm just going to put it off because right now I don't even want to deal with the emotions surrounding the what-ifs.

Robin Chenoweth: So, procrastinators aren't slugs who don't care or have a good work ethic or don't want to see a project through. Sometimes, the problem is they care too much. It's true that some people are by nature better time managers, Wolters says, and those people procrastinate less.

Chris Wolters: They're just more persistent and conscientious in their provision of effort. They don't mind providing effort over longer periods of time in order to reach goals that they see as valuable.

Robin Chenoweth: And research proves that this is the best way to approach college work and, by extension, all difficult tasks, dispelling the "working best under pressure" rationale that procrastinators often tell themselves. Here's my colleague, Chris Turner.

Chris Turner: I had taken a media law class. And it was pretty easy class but there was a big project at the end of the year, write a 10- to 12-page paper I did not do any work to complete that paper until literally the weekend before it was due. Like, that whole weekend was just literally me, like locking myself into in my room just on my computer I didn't eat, I didn't, I barely slept. And, you know, I was just driving myself crazy.

Robin Chenoweth: He was so stressed, and he worked it so hard, but he got it done. And he got 100% on it. So that kind of makes people feel like, oh, yeah, I really do my best work under extreme pressure.

Chris Wolters: You're exactly right, that a lot of students have that belief. A number of them will say, yes, I procrastinate and I procrastinate frequently. I put things off to the last minute. And then they sort of follow that up with the accompanying belief that goes something like this: But I do that on purpose, because the pressure of needing to get it done at the last minute really makes me work hard, or focuses my concentration. Or really allows me to block out every other thing and really get this done. The anxiety of thinking I might not get it done really is a motivating factor. That's not an uncommon belief.

Robin Chenoweth: All sorts of famous procrastinators were thought to be more creative or achieve better results when they were pushed against the wall: Frank Lloyd Wright, Margaret Atwood, Victor Hugo. My colleague is in good company. But fact is, science doesn't back that argument.

Chris Wolters: On the average, you actually do not do your best work when you're trying to get something done at the last minute and, say, stretching an assignment into an overnighner. There's a fair amount of evidence that suggests when you study for an exam, or work on a paper, that dispersed practice — meaning you do work on it over an extended period of time in smaller chunks than in one extended chunk, that the dispersed practice tends to produce better results.

Robin Chenoweth: So, he had that 100% in him all along, but he just maybe drove himself a little nuts trying to get there.

Chris Wolters: Or the assignment wasn't as difficult as he thought it might be, and so it was something that he was able to do successfully. One of my own studies actually showed that students procrastinate less often when academic press is perceived as higher. Academic press is simply the idea that students perceive the instructor or the instructional environment as more difficult or pressing them to do their best work.

Robin Chenoweth: So, if students think the class is harder and requires more effort just to pass, they will procrastinate less. Even thinking differently about the task at hand can force us into approaching it in a more constructive way. Which means that, yes, procrastinators can change their relationship with deadlines, whether it's leaving on time to go to work or something monumental, like completing your thesis on schedule. Blake Szkoda, an Ohio State PhD candidate in biochemistry, is trying to do just that.

Blake Szkoda: Procrastination has led to me having to fess up to my advisor: Hey, like, I haven't written enough of my thesis. I can't defend my PhD thesis on August 12th because it's not written yet. So, hi! I need to be a student more for longer than we anticipated.

Robin Chenoweth: Of course, Szkoda is not the first PhD candidate to extend his dissertation defense deadline. And he's certainly not the first to procrastinate. But over the summer, he took a series of coaching sessions called the DLC Productivity Program, facilitated by Lauren Hensley. And he began to learn some of the classic ways he tricks himself into procrastinating.

Blake Szkoda: A rationalization equals a quote, unquote rational lie that we tell ourselves to get us out of working. So basically, I know that I should work on my thesis. But I haven't worked out

in weeks. Like I need to go for a run. I'm training; in October, I'm running the Columbus half marathon. I should probably go do that instead. Or another one is, in order for me to work, I need to be in the right mood or the right mindset. And I'm just not right now. I need to go take a chill pill for a second and get in the right mindset, and then go work. And basically, like, none of those are real, actual, legitimate excuses.

Robin Chenoweth: Szkoda gets an A+, Lauren Hensley says.

Lauren Hensley: Bruce Tuckman, who is the founder of the Dennis Learning Center at Ohio State, did a lot of research into rationalizations, which are essentially these excuses we give ourselves in the moment that make us feel better about that decision to procrastinate. And the number one that he identified was wishful thinking. And essentially, this idea, well, I work better under pressure, where the truth is, we work only under pressure.

Robin Chenoweth: And so, we stack the deck against ourselves. Especially when it comes to classwork and cognitive work, Tuckman and other researchers have identified a better way.

Lauren Hensley: There is some clear research from cognitive psychology about more effective learning. And, generally, this is comparing things such as massed practice, or cramming, as opposed to distributed or spaced practice, which is basically looking at the material you're trying to learn, coming back to it in 24 hours, reviewing it again in a week. And that spaced out learning over time leads to much greater retention of the material and deeper learning and understanding of the connections. And honestly, same principles could apply to a task such as writing a paper or writing a proposal. So, there are real benefits to working ahead on things — doing them bit by bit — that just can't be achieved in our brains if we're just under that pressure and only giving ourselves that limited amount of time to do the work.

Robin Chenoweth: Chris Wolters.

Chris Wolters: Break it down into pieces that seem more doable on their face. Break the whole task down that way, and then say, okay, I don't have to get the whole thing done today or in this sitting. I just need to get this one thing done. And that makes it seem much more reasonable and doable. It's less daunting; it's less overwhelming Part of my work suggests that, when students develop those kinds of strategies for managing tasks, breaking it down and doing that, that they will procrastinate less, they will feel more confident about doing each step. And then because of that, they'll feel more confident overall about doing the task.

Robin Chenoweth: Both Szkoda and Tyler Leonhart say they now use a timing hack, which they learned in their Dennis Learning Center courses.

Tyler Leonhart: I've used the Pomodoro Technique...

Blake Szkoda: Have you ever heard of the Pomodoro's Technique?

Robin Chenoweth: What's the Pomodoro?

Blake Szkoda: Pomodoro, I believe, is Italian for tomato, I want to say. And I don't 100% know why they say break your tasks up into tomatoes?

Robin Chenoweth: I looked it up. Actually, the developer created the time-management system using his tomato-shaped kitchen timer, which he set to 25-minute increments. In the app, a bell

rings, like in a boxing match, and you earn a five-minute break. At that point, Szkoda takes a lap around the library.

Blake Szkoda: The whole idea, right, is that anyone could do anything for 25 minutes, in theory. And you'd be surprised like how terrible the first 10 minutes are. But, then, the second like 15, those are so much better than. They fly by, because it takes maybe a second to settle into the task. And then you get actually moving on it and it works a lot better.

Robin Chenoweth: Other techniques teach people to prioritize tasks.

Blake Szkoda: A lot of it is I just don't know where to start, right? Like, which entry in my Microsoft to-do should I move to the top? I don't necessarily know. They're all important. Which ones are actually like what I should do with this current moment in time, within the next hour, say? That's probably where I struggle the most.

Robin Chenoweth: Hensley has students chart their tasks on an urgent versus important matrix.

Blake Szkoda: Kind of imagine this graph in your head Y-axis of this graph is urgency.

Robin Chenoweth: The X-axis marks importance. Items that land in the upper right quadrant deserve immediate attention. Things in the lower left: Social media check-ins and maybe organizing your closet? Get to those later, if at all. Using these tricks has helped both Leonhart and Szkoda gain focus and achieve more, faster.

Blake Szkoda: I think I've gotten a lot better at it, even just like in the past month, where I finally identify that most of the time, if I want to get something done, like I have to go to the library. And I have to actually just intentionally sit down, put on all the focal filter, social media, blocker things.

Robin Chenoweth: Apps that block your social media, email notifications, TikTok videos, everything that can yank you back down the rabbit hole and destroy your focus. One that Hensley recommends plants a virtual tree in a virtual forest for every 25 minutes that you keep working — and up to five real trees over time.

Blake Szkoda: But if you do look at your phone, and you open your phone, then the tree dies. And so at the end of the day, if you do this multiple times, you can kind of see this whole like little mini forest that you've planted.

Robin Chenoweth: Even just the visual of it helps you to try to achieve it.

Blake Szkoda: Yes, absolutely.

Robin Chenoweth: These are minor adjustments, aimed at overriding all those rationalizations and avoidance tactics that procrastinators use to dive-bomb their own progress. But they work, Tyler Leonhart says.

Tyler Leonhart: It just it feels like once I made those small changes, then the big rewards took place. It's about waking up on time. It's about making sure you're taking care of yourself first and foremost. Because when you feel like you're living in chaos, then you forget to eat lunch, you forget to eat breakfast, you forget to sleep eight hours.

Robin Chenoweth: So, you do those things first and it helps you with the procrastination, just self-care.

Tyler Leonhart: Small things, yeah. It makes you more motivated. If you have different things in your life that are providing dopamine levels and serotonin to where you're feeling better about the tasks that you're doing ... like I never thought in my life as a kid, I was happy doing the dishes or happy cleaning my room. And now as an adult, or like, it isn't a painstaking task. I enjoy it. I have the motivation. I have the pleasure of just making my bed.

Robin Chenoweth: Wow, like help us all with that. (Laughs) What exactly ... what change took place that you were able to get to liking making the bed? I think I want some of that.

Tyler Leonhart: It's, I guess, I'm developing the sense of satisfaction of the smaller tasks, to where I was in education for numerous years, through undergrad and then graduate studies at Ohio State. I was always planning for the big things once I get this degree, once I get this job, once I get this. But now I'm just planning for the day: once I make my bed, once I eat my lunch, and the smaller things are feeling better to do.

Robin Chenoweth: Wow. I mean, this really was an educational psychology class, wasn't it? Not just ... it wasn't just a one credit-hour, fill it in, you know, so you can graduate type of class.

Tyler Leonhart: It was a very brief and simple course but was a rude awakening that I needed it personally. And I enjoyed it, thoroughly enjoyed it. Because everything that was talked about is content that I needed to hear. And maybe I wasn't ready to hear. But I enjoyed it because it was it was my wake-up call for different areas.

Robin Chenoweth: Chris Wolters.

Chris Wolters: One of the reasons that the study of procrastination is really appealing to me is because it's not just about academics, right? It's not an academic phenomenon. If you go out, and you can sit down at any dinner table, that you're at, and just bring up the topic of procrastination, and people will have stories, and somebody at the table will talk about how they're an extreme procrastinator, and how it's had different effects on their lives.

Robin Chenoweth: And the stress they'll put themselves through. Like how Blake Szkoda used to lie to his parents as a kid, saying he'd done his homework, then sneaking to turn on his light after bedtime so he could finish it. Or my boss's former coworker, who every year takes tax day off and toils until midnight to finish her return. Also, the writer Victor Hugo.

Chris Wolters: I think the story that I heard, and again, I don't know which writer it was, but they basically had themselves put in a room and they gave somebody all their clothes. So, they were in the room naked, and couldn't go anywhere, You know, couldn't do anything, had to be left alone there because they wouldn't get their clothes back until they had finished X number of pages, or something along those lines.

Robin Chenoweth: I read that, too. Was that Victor Hugo? That's crazy.

Chris Wolters: I've never tried it.

Robin Chenoweth: I would think it would make you a little uncomfortable. You know, you've got to be comfortable in your own skin, I guess Even though I know I've suffered from it, and I've

seen the suffering of others, there's a serious side to this, but there's something a little humorous in it. Maybe it's because we all recognize the tendency in ourselves.

Chris Wolters: Yeah, I think that's exactly it. It's a part of being human, that this is something that people do, and that people have experienced at. They have a touchstone. They can easily relate to the struggles that people have. Because, I mean, I haven't met the person yet that is, timely and on top of everything in their life and do it well before due dates or well before, you know, expiration dates on things and stuff like that. It's just, I think everybody can understand and relate to the idea. It's part of the human condition to avoid tasks that we don't find really enjoyable to do. But knowing that we have to get them done and feeling like we ultimately will get them done, but trying to get them done at the last minute or right before the final bell.

Robin Chenoweth: Thanks to Teghpreet Singh, Dustin Broderick, Sabrina Blocker, Chris Turner and Stacey Dorr, for sharing their stories about procrastination in our introduction.

CTA: If you are interested in learning to overcome procrastination, consider taking the 1-credit hour ESEPSY 5194 course, or the Dennis Learning Center's online Productivity Program. Or, sign up for academic coaching through the Dennis Learning Center.

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