MIND GAMES
PROCRASTINATORS
PLAY
BY JANE B. BURKA AND LENORA M. YUEN

Procrastinators are given to moralizing, at least when they try to explain why they habitually put things off. They are lazy, they say, and undisciplined, and they just don’t know how to organize their time.

Their view of themselves sounds reasonable enough, and it is widely accepted. In fact, one conventional way of helping procrastinators is to teach them some time-management techniques.

But the problem is more complicated than that. We have worked with many procrastinators—students who come to the Counseling Center of the University of California at Berkeley and people from the San Francisco Bay area whom we see in private practice—and we believe that chronic postponing is a complex psychological problem that rarely yields to simple remedies.

Procrastination is not just a bad habit but a way of expressing internal conflict and protecting a vulnerable sense of self-esteem. In our experience, few people can give up procrastinating until they understand the function procrastination serves in their own lives. They also need to know why their self-esteem is low and how putting things off acts as a buffer for their shaky sense of self-worth. It is not that insight alone can cure, but that understanding the hidden roots of procrastination often seems to weaken them.

Over the last three years, we have developed what we believe to be a unique treatment approach that integrates strategies from the behavioral, cognitive, and psychodynamic schools of psychological thought. We offer students at Berkeley participation in a time-limited group that continues through one academic term, that is, for eight or nine weeks. For the general public, we have developed a two-day workshop, with a two-week break between sessions. Our treatment plan includes teaching time-organizing strategies as a first step. However, procrastinators usually come to realize that these strategies are not effective, at least not by themselves. That realization often motivates them to look deeper into themselves in order to discover the particular function of habitual postponing in their own lives.

To illustrate our approach, we will introduce several typical, if imaginary, procrastinators, composites of real clients we have seen.

David is a lawyer with a large corporate firm. He was an academic star in college and was accepted into a competitive law school. There he struggled with procrastination, sometimes staying up all night to write his briefs or study for exams, but always managing to do well. With great pride he joined a prestigious law firm, hoping to become an outstanding lawyer, to impress his colleagues, and eventually to be named a partner in the firm.

As he began working, however, David began to procrastinate. Although he thought a lot about a case, he put off doing the necessary background research. He wanted to prepare a defense
Learning to manage time better is not the cure for chronic procrastination. The only way to get down to work is to understand the real motives for sloughing off.
The work of habitual posteriors reflects not their true ability but brinkmanship. It demonstrates how well they can pull things together under pressure.

that was unassailable. When he worked, all he could think of was the inadequacy of his arguments; it was easier to put off the work than to think of being criticized. Although David managed to look busy, he knew he wasn't accomplishing much, and he was plagued by a feeling of fraudulence. As the court date drew near, he began to panic because he hadn't allowed enough time to write an adequate brief.

"Being a good lawyer means everything to me," David said. "But I seem to spend all my time worrying about being great and very little time actually working at it." Gradually he began to recognize that procrastination helps him avoid facing an important issue: can he be as competent a lawyer as his student record promised? By waiting too long to begin writing up his research, David has avoided a test of his true potential. In other words, he is afraid of failing to meet his own high standards, which demand an outstanding performance every time. With this standard, it is not surprising that David couldn't face writing. Ironically, procrastination was the mechanism that allowed him to write at all. By waiting until there was too little time to write a "great" brief, he could finally let himself off the hook with the thought "It's too late to make it brilliant; just get the damn thing done!"

David's work will not be a reflection of his true ability, but of his skill at brinkmanship, it demonstrates how well he is able to produce under last-minute pressure. Procrastination has made a realistic appraisal of his ability impossible. No one will ever know how good a job David could have done if he had allowed enough time. If David's performance doesn't live up to his or others' expectations, he can always say, "I could have done a lot better if I'd just had another week." And if he does well in spite of his last-minute effort, he can congratulate himself for having pulled it off in a pinch. Thus, procrastination serves to maintain the illusion of brilliance, but the illusion is never tested.

When Joanne went to work for a real-estate company, she surprised herself by proving to be more effective at selling than she had expected. Although she had always wanted a career, she had dropped out of college, married, and had two children. Several years later, recognizing how much a career meant to her, she took evening courses, got her real-estate license, and found a job.

Joanne was organized, communicated well with clients, and worked hard. But after initial success, her progress slowed. She put off calling interested buyers and lost several deals. Casual errands and family projects seemed to take on new importance to her, and she began to feel that she just didn't have enough energy to cover all the territory that the real-estate firm had assigned to her. As her sales figures dropped, Joanne began to question whether she was really able to handle real-estate work—or any career at all. Joanne mentioned that her older sister Helen, who worked as a sales clerk, had seemed depressed ever since Joanne began her real-estate job. She realized that she felt guilty about leaving Helen behind. To avoid success, which might mean hurting and abandoning her sister, she hurt herself: she became a procrastinator.

Whereas David learned in the course of treatment that he was afraid of not doing well enough, Joanne found out that she was afraid of doing too well. She was frightened of her success, and instead of making an all-out effort to move ahead, she procrastinated.

Dick is a salesman for a growing computer company. He plays soccer and leads a busy social life. Although he procrastinates, his outgoing personality helps cover up his lack of preparation, so that his sales figures remain high. Dick said that although he generally confides freely in his friends, he never tells them about his good sales record because he expects them to make fun of him for being a workaholic. Although he received a letter of commendation for his outstanding work, he refused to let it appear in the company newsletter. He feared that other salesmen would be jealous and would shun him, leaving him isolated and lonely. Eventually he came to see that procrastinating enables him to reduce his sales volume so that he won't stand out too much. Whenever he makes a lucrative deal despite his delaying tactics, he attributes his success to last-minute luck rather than to ability. In short, Dick, too, fears success.

Henry, a 50-year-old accountant, never finishes his work on schedule. He delays paying bills and returning telephone calls, and puts off doing things that other people expect of him. "I just can't seem to do what I'm supposed to do," he lamented. "If they say have it ready by Tuesday, I know I won't have it until Thursday. It's as if they say, 'Do it now,' and I say, 'I'll do it when I damn well please.'" He has lost two previous jobs because of his tardiness and now is in danger of losing another.

Henry did not realize that procrastination is his way of rebelling against a feeling of being controlled or dominated. For him, any expectation, schedule, or rule represents a battle to be won or lost. Adhering to someone else's time schedule means losing. Procrastination becomes a means of retaining a sense of power and control, even though the only power he has is to say "No!" Although Henry's procrastination is ultimately self-defeat-
Procrastinators may say they're lazy. More often, they fear doing poorly, or doing too well. Or they are rebelling—indirectly—against authority.

ing, his achievement lies in defeating someone else.

Carol, a graduate student in English literature, is another person who rebels by procrastinating. She thrives on attention from her professors and often attempts to form a special relationship with them. Her professor of modern drama was disappointing to her because his lectures were confusing and poorly prepared. Carol interpreted his disorganization to mean that he wasn't interested either in the course material or in the students. Of her failure to turn in a paper, she said angrily, "If he doesn't care about the course, why should I care about the paper?" In her disappointment, she was using procrastination as a means of revenge.

Our procrastination groups, which have eight to 12 members, evolve through three phases, each characterized by a predominant mood. Optimism is the mood of the first two or three sessions. The next three meetings tend to be marked by pessimism, which gives way to realism in the two final sessions. A typical group goes something like this:

**Optimism.** During the first stage, humor and hopefulness prevail about a habit that has previously been a source of shame, humiliation, and despair. Participants express surprise at finding others who share their predicament, and they are relieved to exchange their procrastination "war stories." Henry had a particularly horrendous one to tell. He described a time when he waited so long to begin a complex audit that in order to get an extra week's time, he told his client that his wife was ill in the hospital. The client, anxious about the audit, called Henry at home, where his wife answered. Unaware of Henry's fabrication, she responded to the client's concern for her health with great surprise. The stunned client reported the discrepancy to Henry's supervisor, who fired him.

At the first session, we ask the groups to take a close look at the thinking patterns that have fostered their procrastination by making it seem to them logical and justified. One specific thing we ask the group to do is draw up a list of the excuses they use. One of David's favorites is, "I'll wait until I'm inspired to start working." Joanne convinces herself with, "I've been working so hard I deserve a break." When the list has grown long, we suggest that participants monitor their thoughts and pay attention to their own excuses as they occur.

In the beginning, the group members are less interested in why they put things off than in learning ways to stop. They hope that just being in the group will eliminate procrastination effortlessly, instantaneously, and forever. Taking their desire for quick results into account, we devote part of the first three sessions to outlining behavioral techniques that can be used to help get work done. For instance, we ask each participant to set one personal goal to be achieved before the sessions end. The resolve must be defined behaviorally: "ending procrastination" is a noble goal, but "turning in a history paper on February 8" is a behavioral one. The goal has to be specific, observable, and divided into the component steps necessary for completion. Such specificity is always a challenge for procrastinators, who are used to thinking about work in global terms.

At this point we also introduce time-management techniques. Most procrastinators believe that unless they have a large block of time available, there is no point in getting started. We discuss the "Swiss cheese" method of time management that Alan Lakein, a management consultant, proposed in 1973. He advised "poking holes" in an overwhelming project by taking just a few minutes to accomplish one small piece of it. In accordance with this idea, we suggest that even a half-hour of work is an accomplishment. Using what our colleague Neil Fiore, a psychologist, calls the "un-schedule," we ask the participants to determine how much time they already commit to regular activities and responsibilities; the time remaining can be thought of as the maximum time available for studying, preparing law cases, contacting real-estate clients, or the like. Each half-hour of work is noted on the schedule after it has been accomplished. We encourage participants to reward themselves for any progress along the road to completion. Most procrastinators value only the finished product; we want to help them see that intermediate steps are also accomplishments.

**Pessimism.** By the fourth session, stage two is usually under way. Most participants feel disappointed in the group and in themselves, because learning specific time-management techniques has not solved their problems. Their fantasy of a magical cure has been shattered, and pessimism is pronounced. When it comes to putting their new techniques into practice, most members behave predictably: they procrastinate in this as in everything else. Although a majority of the group has made some progress by now, they still are not satisfied. Ignoring what they have accomplished, they focus on how much is left to do.

Occasionally, progress provokes anxiety rather than relief. Henry had always defined himself as a procrastinator, and as he began to change, he grew concerned about his identity. "If I'm not a procrastinator anymore," he worried, "what am I?"

But there is a bright side to all this.
For some procrastinators, any rule or schedule represents a battle to be won or lost. Adhering to someone else’s time schedule means losing.

We have observed that most procrastinators accept the self-worth equation without question. As David said, “I’m afraid of what I will produce because it feels worse to put out something bad than to procrastinate. It’s a fear of judgment, of being laughed at. Better to show them nothing than to show them something stupid.”

By this time, most members of the group begin to see that they are not lazy but afraid of doing poorly, of doing too well, or of expressing resentment in direct ways instead of indirectly through procrastination. We ask them what they think might happen if they did indeed stop procrastinating. For Dick, success meant taking a stand, making himself visible to the world, and exposing himself to insatiable demands for continued top-notch performance. “I’m afraid of being publicly visible and getting shot down,” he said. “Maybe I won’t be strong enough to fight back. Besides, if I became really successful, I’d have to live up to that success all the time.”

Both Henry and Carol feared that if they stopped procrastinating, they would lose the special, albeit sometimes unpleasant, relationships they developed with authority figures. “If I stop procrastinating,” Carol said, “I might find out I’m just mediocre, and no one would be interested in me.”

Group members begin to understand that their fears stem from low self-esteem. Diminished self-worth therefore becomes a principal topic of discussion: how did they acquire it and how can they get rid of it?

Participants begin to talk about the families they grew up in. We have observed two predominant family patterns. Some group members, including David and Carol, came from families in which there was much pressure to succeed. This pressure was sometimes overt, as in the case of David. His mother often looked over his report cards, which usually had all A’s except for a single B, and asked, “Why did you get this B?” In other cases, the pressure was communicated more subtly. Carol’s father often said to her, “Of course you did well! We know you can do anything you set your mind to.” On the surface such a comment sounds supportive, but it conveys an implicit expectation that the child should never fail. David summed up his experience of family pressure by saying: “It seemed that they loved me for what I did, not for who I was.” If performance was the basis for love, he risked losing that love if he couldn’t measure up.

The other typical family pattern we have observed is the family that doubted the ability of the child to succeed. Bright students who were guided away from college-preparatory classes or children who were held back because of early reading problems are examples of those who might not have learned to trust their intelligence or their ability. Joanne recalled how her family had discouraged her from pursuing an education and a career. “What makes you think you’re so smart?” her sister had demanded.

Similarly, Henry, upon passing his

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Most procrastinators value only the finished product of their efforts. They don’t see that intermediate steps can also bring a sense of accomplishment.

A group counseling program specifically for procrastinators offers several advantages. First, participants publicly acknowledge that procrastination is interfering with their lives and that they need help. Second, each member contracts with the group to accomplish one goal; this accountability helps motivate them to work toward their goals. Third, procrastinators can see in others what they cannot see in themselves. Becoming aware of others’ unrealistic expectations and perfectionist standards helps them see these same patterns in their own behavior. Finally, in the group, procrastinators have the opportunity to be helpful to others and to be valued for personal qualities independent of their accomplishments.

So far, few groups like ours are offered elsewhere in the country, as far as we know, but conventional psychological counseling can help hard-core procrastinators understand and change their behavior. People who want to do something about their problem on their own can try to apply time-management techniques, but they might also consider the possibility that the unrealistically high standards they have set for themselves are actually self-defeating.

Jane B. Burk is a staff psychologist at the Counseling Center of the University of California at Berkeley and a psychologist in private practice in Berkeley. She received her Ph.D. from Columbia University and is writing a book on procrastination to be published by Addison-Wesley.

Lena M. Yuen is a staff psychologist at the Counseling Center of the University of California at Berkeley and has a private practice as a marriage and family counselor in San Francisco and Palo Alto. She was a Danforth Fellow and received her Ph.D. from the California School of Professional Psychology at Berkeley.