

When tomorrow is an excuse

DO IT NOW The procrastination bug plagues us all at some point in life. But when it becomes a way of life, you are in trouble. **Suja Natarajan** shows a way out of this muddle.

It's going to be a long night. And you know it. Yet it's hard to resist the urge to tune into the latest episode of that reality show on TV. The 10-page report – due in exactly 12 hours – can wait. It has waited 10 days; an hour more won't hurt, right?

Been there, done that? Well, you are certainly not alone. The procrastination bug plagues us all at some point in life. You may need a bit of motivation to get things moving, but when you “just don't feel like it” for weeks, months or even years, there's a problem at hand.

Vasuki Rupesh learned her lesson the hard way. She woke up one morning to the startling realisation that she couldn't brush her teeth. “I had developed facial palsy,” she says. The reason, she learnt later, was the delay in getting a tetanus shot for an infection. The homemaker had been postponing the doctor's visit for a while – like most of us tend to.

Why do people willfully delay what has to be done anyway? “It is a consequence of an underlying problem,” says Dr Roshan Jain, senior consultant psychiatrist at Apollo Hospitals. “It could be a result of low self-esteem, obsessional personality, or anxiety or depressive disorders. When people don't have confidence in their ability, the natural tendency is to avoid or delay doing things, hoping that one need not have to attend to it,” he explains.

Procrastinators, broadly, fall into three basic categories. The delayers, who find it hard to get started, and often blame fatigue, self-pity, self-indulgence, or “not feeling like it”; the perfectionists, who worry so much about doing it right that they either don't make a start or keep delaying the task; the easily distractible, who seek immediate gratification rather than the contentment of completing a task.

It turns out that 80 to 95 percent of

college students regularly procrastinate. Is it a trait seen more in the young? “Not necessarily. It's just that youngsters are under immense pressure to perform well, often resulting in self-doubt,” says Dr Roshan. He adds that procrastination is more common in women, as they tend to internalise their emotions.

Further, a child is more likely to follow in the procrastinating parent's footsteps – not always due to the genetic makeup, but due to the environmental influence. “A child sees certain behaviour and

learns. Sometimes, the child could also have some anxiety disorder, which may run in the family,” says Dr Bhupinder Choudhry, consultant psychiatrist at Manipal Hospital.

Some procrastinators claim to love the adrenaline rush when they work under pressure. “Once I put something off, I rarely think about it until the deadline is dangerously near. But when I get to it, I give it my all,” says Hariharan Madhavan, student at IIT-G. This belief is

delusional, insists Joseph R Ferrari, in his book *AARP Still Procrastinating: The no-regrets guide to getting it done*. Because limited time merely provides limited opportunities for you to find the resources you need to complete the task.

Besides, with an enormous accumulation of stress, the body and mind suffer, resulting in health disorders such as high blood pressure, thyroid problems and diabetes. “When you are stressed out you

get into comfort-eating mode and tend to put on weight, which in turn leads to low-self-esteem and reluctance to do or finish things,” maintains Dr Roshan.

Tardiness can have a direct impact on your quality of life. Take personal finance, for instance. Those who tend to put off major investment decisions waiting for the market to ‘improve’ or delay in filing tax returns, only to pay a penalty, rarely realise the long-term implications, say investment experts. Time is money.

With a bit of reflection, you can identify the reasons for procrastination and then, take definite steps to prevent it. As a famous proverb goes, “The best way to get something done is to begin.”

Here go a few practical pointers to getting things done. Now:

Introspect

Ask yourself why you put off a task. Is it something you don't know how to do, or something you don't “feel like doing”? If it's the later, ignore your feelings. We actually don't need to “feel like doing” a task to get work done, says Oliver Burkeman in *The antidote: happiness for people who can't stand positive thinking*.

Make it doable

Experts suggest breaking a complex task into smaller, more manageable sub-tasks and then, focusing on one sub-task at a time. If you dread filing taxes, you can avoid last-minute anxiety attacks by breaking the job into a smaller set of specific tasks – collect necessary papers, organise paperwork, start dividing the papers into income and deductions, check the figures and when you are ready, fill in the form.

Completing smaller tasks gives a feeling of accomplishment and saves you from last-minute stress. Start with the intention of working for a short time, say, two minutes. Once the momentum sets, it will keep rolling.

Deadlines and distractions

Create deadlines -

and stick to them - for each smaller task so that you can complete them in sequence. Executing smaller chunks contributes to your sense of progress in completing a big project. Organisation tools, such as post-its, reminders, may help you glide through the project.

Small things like chatting with your friend, online browsing or loitering can tempt you to put off the task. Turn off email notifications, put your phone on airplane mode and stay away from anything else that prevents you from getting the work done.

Keep good company

Spend time with people who inspire you. Turn to a trusted friend for advice or help when you need it. Announce your plans to family and friends, who will encourage you to stay on the job. No habit is difficult to cultivate if you put your energy and mind to it.

It's a good idea to review your daily progress, say by writing it down in a journal or discussing it with a confidant. All it takes is five minutes. You can also jot down the setbacks, if any, and make notes on the plan of action for the following day.

Rewards and pep talks

It is natural to postpone a task if the incentive for doing it appears far off. It's a good idea to insert your own quick rewards for such tasks that don't offer immediate gratification. For instance, you can treat yourself to a dessert (if you have a sweet tooth), once you have finished the task.

Stop calling yourself a procrastinator; tame your inner critic with positive thoughts of “I can do it” instead of “I can't do it.” Remember that you are accountable for all your choices and actions.

As someone has rightly said, tomorrow is a mystical land where 99 percent of all human productivity, motivation and achievements are stored. It's about time you wake up to the promise of today.

