

# LEADING AS A PROCRASTINATOR

BY PAM MACNAUGHTON

## What's the Problem?

Some people just seem to get life don't they? They seem to be able to focus at will, discipline themselves to get on with tasks when they are given them and deliver calmly to a deadline – or even before a deadline.

And then there's the rest of us. Some of us have mild issues with procrastination. It's all a bit of a joke. But for others, it's no laughing matter. At its worst, it can bring depression and frustration, misery and fear in its wake. It is a pattern that can be set early in life:

- Sometimes we learn to put things off because we quite like the drama of drawing the rabbit out of the hat at the last moment.
- Sometimes, it's because we can quite easily coast – putting in minimum effort and still getting good results.
- Sometimes it's the pattern of our family life, taking everything up to the deadline.
- Sometimes we're just plain afraid of not doing a good enough job and so put off the moment of facing up to it.
- Sometimes, weirdly we're afraid of success, because if we do well and sensibly in this one thing, will people expect it of us in all the rest?

If procrastination is an issue for you, do you recognise yourself in one of these things, or can you identify other reasons for putting things off? It is worth putting the effort into discovering the things that trigger you into procrastination, so that you can start tackling it. The good news is that it is possible to change. I describe myself as a 'recovering procrastinator'. I know this struggle from the inside out. I have learned so much along the way and things are much better than they used to be.

## Leaders and Procrastination

The struggles around procrastination are magnified for those in leadership roles. They are on display for all to see if we prove ourselves to be unreliable at getting things done in good time. Procrastination really matters for leaders, not just for our own well-being but for others' sake too. If we are to be trusted by those we serve, we need to be reasonably reliable at doing the things we said we would in a reasonably timely manner. We don't want to wind everyone up by leaving everything to the last possible moment, or even sabotage their work by being too tardy with our own.

However it is not easy, and for some people, this is, emotionally a really tricky issue. We need to remind ourselves that procrastination is just one possible difficulty that people face, there are plenty of others. It can also affect particularly creative people.

## WHAT IS PROCRASTINATION ANYWAY?

A definition will help us get started.

**Pro-crastinate** comes from the Latin pro-meaning 'forward' + crastinus 'belonging to tomorrow' (from cras 'tomorrow').

So, pushing things into tomorrow rather than today.

## GOD IS WITH US

If we are serious about finding a way out of debilitating procrastination, we must first remember that God is WITH us in this struggle. Not only that, but, as Christians, we have already arrived. There is nothing to prove. We are forgiven, accepted, loved children of God. It is VERY good news. It is something to hold on to as we move forward.

And, just like any behaviour that has become an escape, a bit of an addiction, we will need to be patient with ourselves as we find our way forward, taking small steps at a time.

### TAKE TIME OUT TO REVIEW

It is very easy as leaders to overcommit. For some the route out of procrastination comes with realising that we all have limits, just as Jesus did. We can't do everything that we would like to. Reviewing our commitments and withdrawing from some of them might be necessary to help us get things done.

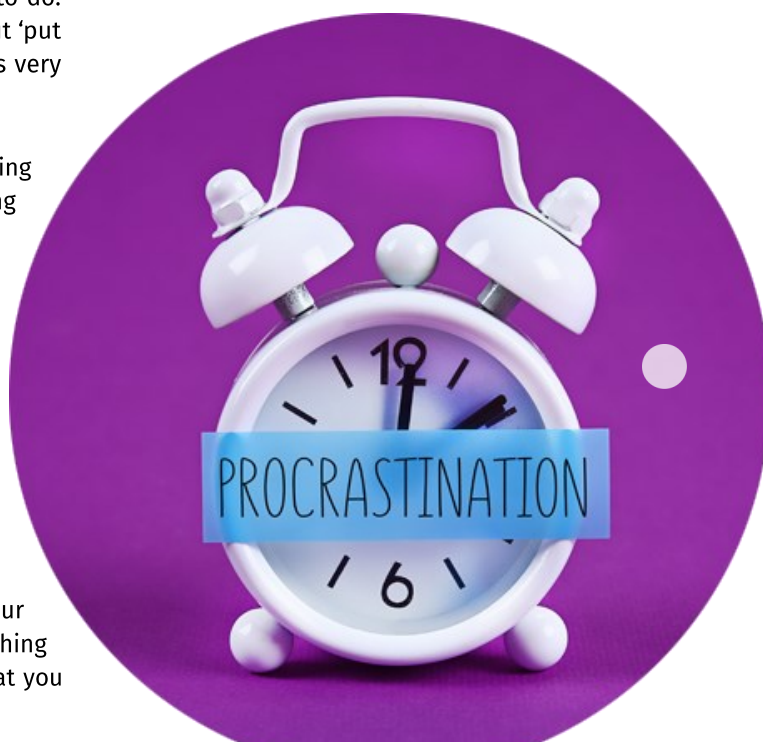
## Methods and Habits

There are many helpful ideas out there to help procrastinators. Here are some that are both realistic and helpful. Used at different times, and now becoming normal, they have been game-changers for me.

1. **Achievement list** This is a very liberating way of getting things done. Put your to do list out of sight, where it can't weigh you down. Then, on a new sheet of paper, write down one thing that you are willing to do. Probably one tiny thing. Make your instruction to yourself really simple and clear. Then do the task without any hesitation. Cross it off and write down the next one. Again, do it without any distraction and cross it off. Repeat. This method builds trust in yourself as someone who can do things, not just plan them. Even better, it gives you an ever-growing list of achievements. See *The More You Do, the Better You Feel* by David Parker for a detailed explanation of this method.
2. **Clear instructions** Often we procrastinate because we're not clear with ourselves what we're trying to do. 'Tidy my study' might result in no action at all, but 'put all the books away', or 'file ten pieces of paper' is very clear and achievable.
3. **Keep it small** If you find yourself resistant to doing anything constructive, go right back to writing down a tiny task. Once you get some momentum going, you can tackle things that are a little more demanding.
4. **Embrace routines** Many creative people are allergic to routines. However, learning to do the daily tasks in a routine way gets them done much more easily. A routine allows you to preserve brain power for more creative and effective things.
5. **Order your desk** Take some time to set up your filing system and your work area to make everything easy to find. You may have a backlog of filing that you

either need to set aside time to blitz and sort, or tackle each day until it is done. The more ordered your systems, the more easily you can track your tasks.

6. **Make it fun** Depending on your personality, you might find that deliberately making things fun helps. You might be motivated by colourful lists, different types of music for different times of day, or deciding on particular rewards for completing particular tasks.
7. **Monitor your energy** Observe when your most creative times are during the day, and do the hardest tasks then. Keep the more routine ones for your post-lunch slump, or whichever part of the day is your least energetic.
8. **One habit at a time** Changing old ways of doing things takes time. It's easy to set a goal like: 'I'm going to change my whole life from tomorrow' and then get discouraged when you can't do everything at once. Give yourself time and change one habit at a time.
9. **Make yourself accountable** Painful as it can be, agreeing a deadline with someone else for a piece of work helps to focus your mind. If you're going to miss the deadline, then letting that person know also helps to keep you focussed.
10. **Learn to act on a meeting straight away** Often the energy for getting something done, or started, is highest when you have first committed to it. Getting into a habit of allowing time for action straight after meetings and then starting things off helps to keep things moving.



## EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT

It is worth exploring some time and task management systems. There are many out there. Just a few recommendations:

- Do not let the search for the perfect system become a tool for procrastination in itself. It is too easy to waste time on the internet searching this issue.
- The most helpful systems for procrastinators are those developed by others who have struggled. The naturally organised may not understand the inner resistance that goes with procrastination, so their systems may feel too alien.
- Find a system you like to use and practice it. Keep going with it until you have absorbed all you can from it. Then, if you need variety, learn from a different system. Your aim is to find systems and habits that will last and gradually free you from procrastination.

'For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.'

2 TIMOTHY 1:7

## CELEBRATE

Remember to celebrate every new achievement. Be kind to yourself and concentrate as much on what you have done as what you have still to do. Stop to notice what new anti-procrastination habits you have established and give thanks for every bit of progress.

'If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.'

JAMES 1:5

Keep this journey out of procrastination as a matter for prayer, and remember that God is on your side, cheering you on. Remember that it is worth dealing with this issue if we are to be reliable and responsible leaders.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



- Which types of activity do you find easy to do? Which types are causes of procrastination?
- When are your most energetic times of day for doing difficult tasks?
- What one habit are you going to work on as a result of reading this?

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

- The More You Do the Better You Feel, David Parker (Darwin Bay).
- Atomic Habits, James Clear (Random House).
- Productivity Ninja, Graham Allcott (Icon Books).
- [Flylady.net](http://Flylady.net), Marla Cilley.
- [Markforster.squarespace.com](http://Markforster.squarespace.com), Mark Forster.

