

Procrastination and the Pains of Living in a Work-focused Society

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PROCRASTINATION: IT IS a problem many struggle with in all facets of life, from the workplace to personal life. The vast majority of people have put something off at some point in their lives, and I would wager most of us have procrastinated much more than once. But is it truly so bad? Procrastination is often seen as a problem we must overcome, and indeed, it often creates roadblocks against productivity and can lead to many issues down the line. However, procrastination itself might not be the issue; what if our concept of productivity is itself flawed? The way our society views those who struggle with procrastination or similar issues is ableist and enforces the idea that said people are “lazy” and do not properly contribute. This is incredibly harmful to those who are neurodivergent. In reality, procrastination is a complex phenomenon and those who suffer from it chronically are going through a lot more than what might be apparent on the surface. While the advice people often provide to procrastinators can assist them at a surface level, it is rarely ever helpful beyond a superficial layer and can oftentimes be patronizing or dismissive.

It is very easy to say that procrastination is a problem, but sources often differ on the causes, effects, and solutions. It seems that nobody is quite able to agree on what procrastination does and does not do, leading to a plethora of conflicting

sources giving those seeking help varying solutions to follow. It also does not help that perspectives differ wildly in regard to the topic, and oftentimes are influenced heavily by the author’s unconscious biases. Take, for example, Eric Jaffe’s discussion of the topic in his article “Why Wait? The Science Behind Procrastination,” in which he attempts to dissect the behavior and find out its causes and effects. He concludes that procrastination is a “complicated failure of self-regulation” which delays work in favor of pursuing pleasure, regardless of whether the person involved genuinely wishes to procrastinate or not (Jaffe). According to his research, solutions include counseling, chopping up tasks into smaller tasks, and self-forgiveness, as “students who forgave themselves after procrastinating on the first exam were less likely to delay studying for the second one” (Jaffe). The actual content of this article is decently helpful, but it has a tone which can best be described as unfriendly to those who suffer from procrastinating. Jaffe describes it as a “peculiar behavior” and a “maladaptive lifestyle,” and for somebody who directly acknowledges the importance of self-forgiveness, he does not consider once how describing procrastination as a complete failure to regulate one’s emotions will impact those self-conscious about their struggles. Even the title has a hint of aggression; “Why Wait?” it

asks, challenging readers directly for an answer to why they procrastinate. These might appear to be minor and innocuous, but together they can scare away those seeking help since they ultimately demonize the target audience: procrastinators in need of assistance. Articles about procrastination need to be helpful, not harmful, and yet many can end up doing just that, further amplifying the guilt many procrastinators struggle with.

Other sources might not necessarily be condescending to their audience, but might end up offering advice that can be tone-deaf or shallow. One such article that those seeking help might turn to if they are feeling philosophical is Dr. Timothy Pynchyl's "Wash Your Bowl: Insight From a Koan," which uses a traditional Zen practice to reflect on how procrastination works. His viewpoint is admittedly unique but quite simplistic and more aspirational than helpful. According to Pynchyl and his koan interpretation, we all have a "reactive stance" when thinking about a task (i.e. "But that'll take forever" or "It's such a slog to get through") and negative reactions to a task are what causes procrastination. This is an interesting perspective on the subject, as pessimism can certainly worsen morale and therefore make it harder to be productive. However, the solution proposed by Pynchyl is to simply not "get caught up" in such feelings, which is about as helpful as telling a depressed person to stop feeling so sad. He does propose meditation, which has been shown to have positive effects on those who practice it. According to "Transcendental Meditation and Productivity," by David R. Frew, those who meditate "reported they experienced increased job satisfaction, better performance and better relationships with supervisors and co-workers." But unfortunately, it is also equally as difficult to get into a rigorous routine such as daily meditation for serial procrastinators, so

while it could be an improvement to some, the advice offered by Pynchyl gives little to no benefits to those who struggle excessively with the problem at hand. Pynchyl's advice seems good-intentioned, and it's certainly not harmful in any way, but in a similar vein to other writings about procrastination it fails to break the subject down and instead offers a shallow solution to an unfortunately complex problem.

Neither author previously mentioned discussed how underlying conditions can seriously impact one's workflow; procrastination is linked with many other factors which should also be addressed in the conversation, but always seem to slip out of focus in favor of repeating self-help advice and bickering over the potential vices and virtues of the subject. For example, take the concept of executive dysfunction. As defined by Jaime Herndon in "Understanding Executive Dysfunction and How It Shows Up," executive dysfunction is a state caused by "irregular and slower development in the parts of the brain responsible for working memory and emotional regulation." It is correlated with difficulties in making plans, forgetfulness and misplacement of belongings, problems staying organized, and problems with impulse control, among many other potential symptoms. Executive dysfunction is linked to many common mental conditions, including ADHD, ASD, depression, and anxiety disorders, and many of the symptoms manifest in ways akin to procrastination. People with these conditions cannot just magically make their symptoms go away. Regardless of therapy, medication, and the practically infinite number of self-help tips out there for managing procrastination, it can be debilitating and result in real-world repercussions. An article by the Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA) found that "1 out of 3 persons diagnosed with ADHD is jobless at any time," due to a variety of factors that

include “poor planning skills, memory issues, self-discipline, behavior awareness, lack of motivation and concentration” (“Impact of ADHD at Work”). If those factors seem familiar, it is because they are: these are often issues which contribute to procrastination. The correlation between procrastination and mental health/neurodivergence cannot be understated, and yet it is often omitted, as is often the case when mental health is involved.

Despite the often lackluster quality of advice given to help with procrastination, there are outliers which provide a clearer picture of the issues surrounding procrastination. One article which does care about the underlying causes of procrastination is Aidan Doyle’s “I Was Going to Write an Essay on Procrastination.” Extracted from his book *The Writer’s Book of Doubt* and later published separately, this essay views procrastination as the result of a multitude of factors. From Doyle’s perspective, “a procrastinator becomes disproportionately motivated by the pain of failure” as well as other factors such as anxiety, low self-esteem, perfectionism, indecisiveness, and a poor work-life balance. Doyle’s willingness to bring attention to the serious mental health issues that can often cause procrastination is commendable and a breath of fresh air when compared to the endless sea of discussions around the topic which remain blind to the internal causes. He suggests trying to reduce the anxiety of the situation by prioritizing rest and setting time aside for focusing, but also goes in-depth into more fundamental changes that can be made to rework problems procrastinators often face. He brings attention to Neil Fiore’s “Unschedule” technique, wherein leisure time is directly planned for and any projects which are being procrastinated have specific 30 minute blocks of time allotted to them in order to break up the work and make it less daunting. Another concept

he recommends is making fake deadlines which others might help enforce, as public accountability can assist in influencing productivity. Of course, these strategies are not foolproof; for those who struggle with establishing routines in the first place or hate excess pressure, these solutions are not going to work. But at the very least, Doyle’s writing is willing to give a more thorough analysis of the topic, and he does so with care and empathy. When discussing a topic with negative connotations like procrastination, prioritizing your audience’s well-being and being honest about the topic’s nature is vital.

As someone with both ADHD and GAD, I have quite a lot of experience with getting overwhelmed and consequently procrastinating until the last second. In an almost humorous sense of irony, I have even struggled with procrastinating this very essay about procrastination. It is not necessarily my fault; executive dysfunction is simply something that I live with every day, even with the assistance of medication. I do not think it should have to be a horrible thing I am ashamed of. But unfortunately, I am not at liberty to make that decision, as I have constant deadlines looming over my head and expectations to always succeed. It is how our world has been built, and so be it if some get swept under the waves of production.

Trying to function in a world built without any consideration for people like you is exhausting. It is a demeaning, draining experience that requires a subjugation of the self to maintain behavior which those around you see as acceptable. Procrastination is something that everybody has done, but those who suffer from it the most hardly receive any sympathy for their way of processing work, even if it is completely out of their control. It is not beneficial, by any means, but it is also not just a lack of work ethic; it is a complex topic that cannot be

solved with a shallow article and the journalistic equivalent of snake oil. I do not want to come off as nihilistic; I am sure that somebody could find value in any one of the articles presented here, and I applaud them for that. But in reality, serial procrastination and those who suffer from it would benefit most from a therapist or professional if

they require dire assistance. We as a society cannot keep making people feel worthless for what they are going through; we need to work to help each other up and give consideration to those who process things differently, or else we will continue to isolate and work against neurodivergent people.

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