

Doing It Now: Overcoming Procrastination

Yes, we're all procrastinators. We put things off day after day, week after week, month after month. We human beings are *born* procrastinators. The good news is that each of us can develop, little by little, the discipline to get things done.

Successful people throughout the ages have developed tricks to get themselves started. Here is a selection, taken, in large part, from Edwin Bliss's wonderful small book, *Doing It Now*.

JUST DO IT: We need to realize that we are *never* going to be "in the mood" to do the thing we've been putting off. Yes, we want to send our auntie a thank-you note, to detail the car, to start the math problems, to write the paper, to practice the trumpet, but we excuse ourselves by saying the timing isn't right: "I'll do it another time. I can't possibly do it now because

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| ➤ It's not due yet | My stomach hurts |
| ➤ I don't feel well | I have to wash the dishes |
| ➤ I don't know where to begin | There's a party tonight |
| ➤ It's raining | It's too pretty to be inside |
| ➤ It's too early in the day | It's too late in the day to begin now |
| ➤ I need to go grocery shopping | I've got allergies |
| ➤ I'll probably mess it up | Someone else could do it better |
| ➤ I work better under pressure | I'm hungry |
| ➤ I only have a little bit of time | I don't have any discipline |
| ➤ My family needs me right now | I deserve some free time for myself |
| ➤ I need to start getting some rest | I don't really care that much about it |
| ➤ All of a sudden I feel so drowsy | This project/field isn't right for me, anyway. |

Do successful athletes allow themselves excuses like these? No. They know the definition of discipline: *making yourself do something you don't want to do*, no matter how bad you feel, no matter how hard it's raining, no matter how scared you are. Successful athletes know that excuses are irrelevant. They brush them off like gnats. The athlete's motto is JUST DO IT.

MAKE A BALANCE SHEET: on a piece of paper, we draw two columns. In the first, we write down all our excuses for putting off our project. In the second, we write down all the advantages we would receive from accomplishing it. Comparing the two columns will motivate us to get going.

CONSIDER BEFORE AND AFTER: If we're like most people who are putting off an intimidating project—for example, a research paper—we're probably experiencing one or more of the following symptoms: extreme drowsiness and fatigue, restlessness, knots in our stomach, anxiety, depression, dissatisfaction with everything, and self-hatred which leads to fights with loved ones. Now vividly imagine what we'll feel like once we've taken even the first little steps to accomplishing our project: energy, exhilaration, peace, physical well-being, a deep sense of satisfaction with life, a feeling of warmth towards our loved ones, and a strong sense of self-esteem.

REMEMBER THAT IT'S NOT RELAXATION BUT CHALLENGE THAT MAKES US HUMANS HAPPY: As University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi tells us in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*,

Contrary to what we usually believe . . . the best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. (3)

PLANNING SESSION FIRST: More often than we realize, it's *not knowing what our first step is* that prevents us from starting a project. The solution is preceding our first step with a "project planning session." Why not make it a treat? Professionals often meet at restaurants or cafes to plan their projects. We can sit in a café and make a list of our steps over a cup of coffee and a donut. Then we'll know how to begin, and we'll begin with a sweet taste in our mouth!

CLARIFY THE PROJECT: Sometimes we push an assigned project out of our minds for days or weeks because—although we don't consciously realize it—we simply don't have enough information to be able to start. For instance, we might put off a letter our boss wants us to write because it was never really made clear to us what the letter was supposed to say. Or we put off doing a homework assignment because we don't really understand it. Our first step in this situation is to go to our boss or instructor and clarify what we're supposed to do.

USE THE SALAMI TECHNIQUE: Often we postpone a project because it seems simply overwhelming: stuccoing our house, for example, or finding a job, or writing a research paper. The project seems so enormous that we freeze up. What's the solution? Edwin Bliss calls it the Salami Technique. We know what an Italian salami looks like: huge, tough, greasy, not something we could sink our teeth into. But when we cut it up into thin slices, each is tender, savory!

And that's what we can do with our overwhelming project: break it down into tiny little steps, *each one too small to be intimidating*. Let's say we've been procrastinating writing an eight-page research paper. Every time we think about this paper, our stomach knots. And so day after day, we put it off. The solution? We break the project down into teeny little steps, which we write as a checklist:

- turn on our computer,
- go to the NMHU web site
- go to the Quick Links drop down list
- select libraries
- go to Full-Text Databases
- pull up one electronic database, for example, Academic Search Premier
- type search terms into the search boxes
- click on one article that sounds interesting
- print it out
- read it, highlighting at least two points in it that might be useful for our paper
- etc.

Each of those is a tender little slice, too small to be intimidating. Tiny slice by tiny slice, we are getting our project done. And each time we check off another step, we feel a little surge of pride, we feel our confidence increasing.

THINK (very) SMALL: Again, the secret to the Salami Technique is to start every intimidating project by breaking it down into *tiny* steps. We should break down our steps to the point where each one of them is so small that it doesn't make us anxious. For example, let's say we always dread doing our taxes. First we mark a project planning session date on our calendar. Step one (when that day comes) might be to sit down with a cup of tea and to make our list of tiny steps. Step two might be to take the tax form and read through it. Step three might be to find our 1040's. Step four might be to gather our bank statements, and so on. Each step is painless. Yet every time we check a step off our list, we get a little glow of satisfaction and our will power becomes (permanently) a little stronger.

OVERCOME INERTIA: A law in physics states that an object at rest wants to remain at rest (inertia) and that an object in motion wants to remain in motion (momentum). We've all probably had the experience of being faced with a huge pile of dishes. Even though it's early, we feel exhausted just looking at them, and we want to go to bed. But we put our hands in the hot, soapy water and wash one glass, then another one. Now we're doing the plates, and we don't feel so sleepy anymore. By the time we've finished the pots, we're full of energy, looking around for more things to clean. Maybe we clean the stove and mop the kitchen floor. Before we started, we were feeling inertia. *Inertia often disguises itself as sudden, incredible*

tiredness. As soon as we courageously broke through the inertia barrier by performing one little action—washing one dish—we began experiencing momentum. Now we don't want to stop: we're "on a roll."

MAKE A DEAL WITH THE CLOCK: A great way to get ourselves to take that first little step that can break our inertia is to make a deal with the clock. This is one of Bliss's most valuable suggestions. We say to ourselves, "I'm tired and the last thing on *Earth* I feel like doing is starting this project, but I'll work on it for one hour and then, if I want to, I can stop for the rest of the day." We'll usually find that after the hour is up, we've got momentum, and it's easy and fun to keep going. This technique is particularly good for writing projects, whose early stages can be very discouraging. "I'll never think of anything to say," we cry, hurling our pen against the wall. But if we stick with it for an hour, we'll find our ideas beginning to flow.

REWARD YOURSELF: Rewards can help us start a project we've been dreading. We could promise ourselves a new CD when we finish the first draft of our history paper, a Dairy Queen when we finish the Employment History section of our resume, dinner with a friend when we finish painting the porch. Visual goals may seem silly, but they are extraordinarily motivating. We can put a calendar over our desk and give ourselves stars each day for every hour we spend or every step we accomplish. We can make a chart with grid paper or out of a picture or map of our goal and fill in one square for each hour we spend or each step we take towards our goal.

LEARN THAT DISCIPLINE IS A MUSCLE: We strengthen our will power every time we do something we absolutely DON'T want to do. We empower ourselves a little more every time we tell ourselves, "Oh, no, not *that* project! I can't *possibly* start a big project like that *now!*" and we answer ourselves, "Oh, yes, I can! I can take a first little step. Here goes!"

Tips for Accomplishing School Projects and Life Dreams

- ❖ Pretend to be bold and soon you will *be* bold. Put inspiring quotations over your desk: “There is nothing in life worth doing that’s not going to scare you at first” (life path counselor Barbara Sher); “Fortune favors the bold” (Erasmus); “Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain” (Emerson); “Be bold, and mighty forces will come to your aid” (Basil King); “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it” (Goethe).
- ❖ Trust. Starting work on a big project like a research paper is like walking into a party where you don’t know anybody. You feel nervous because you have no idea what you’re going to talk about. But if you walk bravely in, the conversation will gradually take care of itself. In the same way, begin to work on your paper with trust. Remember, “All beginnings are somewhat strange, but we must have patience, and, little by little, we shall find things, which at first were obscure, becoming clear” (St. Vincent de Paul); “Do not hold mental pictures of difficulties and failures, but lift your mind above them and visualize powers and achievements” (Norman Vincent Peale); “Knock, and it shall be opened to you” (Jesus); “Begin to weave and God will give the thread” (German saying); “Leap, and the net will appear” (Julia Cameron); “If your mind can conceive it and your heart can believe it, then you can achieve it” (a graduation address). Just begin, and have trust that as you go along you will find what you need to say. (See handout on discovering writing ideas)
- ❖ Remember that most things that seem hard and unpleasant are actually made up of many tiny steps that are easy and fun. Make a list of the basic steps to any challenging goal. Then break each of those steps down into mini-steps *too tiny to cause any anxiety*. Check each one off as you do it and enjoy your growing sense of empowerment.
- ❖ Before you stop work for today, *begin* the next step. Tomorrow you’ll already be in the flow!
- ❖ Never belittle your dreams. The dreams closest to your heart, no matter how foolish or offbeat or impossible they seem, may be exactly what you were put on Earth to accomplish. As Joseph Campbell says, “Follow your bliss. Go with the thing that really talks to you.”
- ❖ Never doubt the value of what you want to do. The poet Longfellow reminds us, “Give what you have; to someone it may be better than you dare to think.”
- ❖ Take time to nourish your dreams. Make quiet time to daydream/pray about them, write in your journal about them, talk to your friends about them. Remember the poet Antonio Machado’s words: “The dream that is not fed with dream disappears.”
- ❖ Dream big. “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood” (Daniel Burnham). A big, bold, scary dream will motivate you and energize you a lot more than a small, modest, comfortable one.
- ❖ To turn a dream into a successful goal, write it down in a goal journal in vivid detail in the present tense (as if you’ve already achieved it); ask a higher power to guide you to your goal if it’s for your greatest good; break your goal down into the smallest possible steps; schedule these steps on your calendar with a target date; start taking one step at a time; tell everybody you know about your goal; surround yourself with things that remind you of your goal; read your goal journal every day.
- ❖ Expect the universe to help you out with surprising coincidences when you follow your bliss. Joseph Campbell explains: “If you do follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the time, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in the field of your bliss, and they open the doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don’t be afraid, and doors will open where you didn’t know they were going to be” (*The Power of Myth* 120) 26 July 08