

Procrastinating? This Simple Mind Shift Will Boost Your Productivity (M)

Can't seem to get things done? Find out how to break the cycle.

People procrastinate on important tasks because of more than just poor self-control, a study finds.

It is also down to how people weigh positive and negative thoughts about the task up against each other.

Some people are particularly biased towards the negative, which is what causes them to procrastinate more.

The good news is that procrastination can be reduced by boosting motivation, analysing the situation and getting the right balance between positive and negative thoughts (yes, that's right, the negative is still important).

Lean towards the negative

The conclusions come from a series of three studies examining when and why people put off important tasks.

For their analysis, the researchers used the idea of 'valence weighting bias': how we weigh up positive and negative signals related to an unpleasant task.

Professor Russell Fazio, study co-author, said:

"And the question is, which wins that battle—if, indeed, there are elements of both positivity and negativity?"

Broadly speaking the results showed that when people lean towards the negative, they are more likely to procrastinate.

Professor Fazio said:

“We’re looking at this consideration of the positives and negatives that exist when people are making decisions and how valence weighting bias shapes which route people take.”

Got to get it done

For the first study, people were asked about completing their federal tax return.

Professor Fazio explained:

“The idea is that people, at least for a brief moment, are asking the question, ‘Do I want to do this now?’

And there really are both positive and negative signals: ‘I certainly don’t want to do that. It’s an aversive task.’

That’s the negative signal.

But then there’s also a positive signal: ‘I’ve got to get it done, and I’ll feel good if I do it right’.”

Dr Granados Samayoa, the study’s first author, explained the results:

“What we find is that people whose negative attitudes generalize more strongly tend to engage in unnecessary task delay to a greater extent.”

A second study of students brought self-control and motivation into the mix along with the valence weighting bias.

This found that all were important in whether or not students procrastinated.

Dr Samayoa explained the balance:

“For people who don’t think about it too much or can’t think about it too much, their valence weighting tendencies guide their behavior in a straightforward manner.

But if somebody is more motivated and able to think more about it, that might bring other considerations that dampen the influence of the valence weighting bias.”

Balance positive & negative

A third study found that it is possible to nudge people away from the negative in order to stop them procrastinating.

Interestingly, a balance between positive and negative seems to produce most adaptive results.

Professor Fazio said:

“It’s better to be more objectively balanced than to be at either extreme.

But the situation where a particular valence weighting bias is likely to be problematic is going to vary.”

Students who were too positive in their evaluations told themselves they were doing so well they did not need to do any work.

This might look like procrastination from the outside, but it is actually closer to overconfidence.

The mind, it seems, has many paths to laziness.