

# Understanding Creative Procrastination

by

**Kenneth Fields, MA, NCC, LMHC**

[www.openmindcounseling.com](http://www.openmindcounseling.com)

Procrastination has a bad rap. It is a very creative and often useful behavior. Generally defined as putting things off until the last minute, procrastination is also putting things off until the best time. For some, it's that last minute rush which energizes and motivates. For others, it's that last minute when important information is made available allowing then for more accurate decisions and actions. Some people may be perceived as procrastinating but they are actually prioritizing, working on more important tasks first. In these instances, procrastination is creative, effective and useful. However, there are situations in which procrastination can be a problem.

One of the more common reasons people procrastinate is that they simply do not enjoy the activity they are supposed to be doing. They put it off and put it off until they can't put it off any longer. And then they do the work, but not very well. Another reason some people procrastinate is passive aggressive behavior. If, for example, a person is angry with someone who wants them to do something, they simply don't do it until the very last minute, if even then. Passive aggressive behavior is a way of getting back at someone without doing anything. Procrastination may be a way a person asserts their independence. If they believe they "have to" do something, they can gain the upper hand by simply not doing it, or doing it on their own time schedule, which may be at the very last minute. Another form of procrastination is simple avoidance through physical illness. For example, a student who wants to avoid going to class to take an exam because they are not yet prepared enough, may come down with a cold thus postponing the exam. A person can procrastinate as a way of dealing with their fear of failure because if they do not complete the task they cannot fail at it. And others may procrastinate as a way of dealing with their fear of success because if they do not complete the task they will not feel the pressure and stress to keep up that same level of performance. Procrastination may also be a symptom of an underlying issue such as depression, anxiety or traumatic stress. And, there are those who may procrastinate simply because they are not well organized. In such cases, procrastination is not really the issue at hand, but rather time management, goals setting and self-discipline which are different topics.

There are also more serious forms of procrastination. Habits of performance in which a person has simply learned through their upbringing to put things off can become quite problematic. In these cases, there is no immediate or current creative underpinning to the behavior; there is no advantage in postponing decisions or actions. Such people may find it difficult to meet performance expectations at a job and as a result may find it difficult to hold a job. Such behaviors can cause conflicts within a marriage or a household, especially when one partner is organized and efficient and the other is a chronic procrastinator. Ironically, this learned behavior may have originally been developed to gain approval and as an adult it is actually gaining disapproval. Learned behaviors such as this can be difficult to change because they become part and parcel of the self-image. The behavior becomes "just who I am."

However, as I have stated in several other essays, all behaviors arise from an underlying positive intention to satisfy valid needs. The means by which those needs are satisfied may have worked in the past but in the present may well be distorted, skewed, ineffective or outdated; nevertheless, the need itself is legitimate. In the case of chronic procrastination learned from childhood, the need may simply be to gain the acceptance of parents if they too were procrastinators. Children model their parents. This is how they learn and it is often how they gain the approval of their parents. Learned procrastination may also be a form of protection as procrastination can be an effective means of avoiding or postponing criticism. That is, in a household where the child can never do anything well enough and is constantly reprimanded, it can make sense for them to put off doing anything in an attempt to postpone the bad feelings which come from completing a task. This learned behavior then becomes established as a norm and is carried over into adulthood. Children can be terribly creative when it comes to learning coping strategies and procrastination can be one of those strategies. Procrastination then in adulthood becomes a problem not only because of work performance but the accompanying emotions of stress, guilt, shame and the growing sense of worthlessness.

Overcoming procrastination is only advisable when it gets in the way of effective performance. In those situations where it serves a purpose, as in energizing and motivating, it is really not a problem. When it is used as a means of delaying important decisions awaiting critical information, it is not a problem. However, if it is causing sub-standard work performance or conflicts in the home, then it needs to be looked at as a problem behavior. Solutions do exist as it is a learned behavior and new behaviors can be learned. The key to replacing old behaviors with new ones is to first understand the underlying positive intention, the needs striving to be satisfied, in the old behaviors and then coming up with alternative behaviors which can meet those same needs. From that point it is a matter of visualizing the new behavior, role-playing the new behavior and setting up incentives and rewards for engaging in the new behavior and completing tasks in a timely manner.