

JUST SAY NOW

ARE YOU TIRED OF PROCRASTINATING? TODAY COULD BE THE DAY YOU FINALLY GIVE IT UP—AND TAKE BACK YOUR LIFE. **BY SHARLENE K. JOHNSON**



If you're like most women, your days are so jam-packed it's hard to imagine cramming in one more thing. So when those big, important projects never get done, it's easy to rationalize that you just don't have time, what with taking care of your kids, your house, your job and dealing with the endless "urgent" tasks that crop up every day.

Ah, excuses. We've all got them. In truth, that avalanche of daily chores may be just another form of procrastination. "I can do 10 or 20 things in my

day, but if I don't put in at least half an hour on my main project, then I'm going to feel like I didn't do anything," explains Neil Fiore, Ph.D., author of *The Now Habit* (Tarcher/Putnam).

Oddly enough, we don't postpone only annoying chores—we also set aside the things we want to do. "Women often put off investing time and energy in their own growth, their own career, their own wants," says Linda Sapadin, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist based in Valley Stream, New York, and author of

Master Your Fears (Wiley). Whether it's taking an art class, getting in shape or finding a better job, we all have things that hover forever on our "must do" lists. "Women tend to be socializers and caretakers," says Fiore, "so they often avoid tasks that might take a few hours a week for many months but would make a big change in their lives."

While everyone procrastinates for different reasons, Sapadin believes that women tend to fall into three categories: the perfectionist, who stalls because

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Don't spend too much time on self-analysis, which can lead to even more procrastination.

doing something perfectly is such an intimidating goal; the over-doer, who has trouble saying "no" to others and has little time for her own goals; and the worrier, who avoids things that make her anxious. Surprisingly, it's not just fear of failure that can stop a worrier in her tracks; some procrastinators actually fear success, thinking that it might cause others to expect more from them than they can deliver.

What about causes? Look to your family background, although "There's no gene for being a procrastinator," says Joseph Ferrari, Ph.D., professor of psychology at DePaul University in Chicago. According to his research, chronic procrastination is a learned behavior that may be more common among people with stern, emotionally distant fathers and indecisive mothers. Unable to please one parent or get support from the other, they learn as children to simply avoid taking action. Procrastinators also tend to have lower self-esteem and to be less self-confident than people who are able to tackle things immediately.

Sound familiar? Whether or not you fit the mold, don't spend too much time on self-analysis. "Asking why can lead to more procrastination because it creates self-blame, self-criticism and depression," warns Fiore. "And in the meantime, you will have also avoided facing the task that you fear."

So how do you get past the perfectionism, the worry, the busywork? There *are* ways to get things done. Try these tips and see what fits your style. If some of them seem like the opposite of what you should do, give them a shot anyway—you might be pleasantly surprised. (Feeling guilty because you really should be doing something else right now? Skip ahead to #5.)

1 time yourself

"People say, 'Oh, this is going to take an hour and I just don't have an hour right now.' So they don't even start," says productivity expert Laura Stack, author of *Find More Time* (Random House). Reality check: You may never get that full hour. "Life happens in what I call 'chunky time.' You might get 5 minutes here or 10 minutes there," Stack says. "So if I have 10 minutes before a meeting, I'll get started on a task, even if I know it will take more time to finish."

It's also important to let go of the idea that someday you'll be "in the mood" to tackle the tough stuff. Repeat after me, "It's not going to happen." Set a kitchen timer for 5 or 10 minutes. Work on the dreaded task until the timer goes off. That's enough time to take a small first step—open a file, look up a phone number, find a missing document. And chances are good you'll have enough momentum to keep going. If you're truly miserable, though, stop for the day and go back to it tomorrow for another few minutes. (Jot your last thought on a sticky so you can pick up where you left off.) Eventually, one chunk at a time, you will finish the job!

2 make a choice

"People who procrastinate tend to think in terms of 'have to,'" says Fiore. "But that automatically means you don't want to, that you're a victim." Replacing "I have to" with "I choose to" puts you in charge of your time. "By choosing to face something uncomfortable, you get rid of the ambivalence associated with things you have to do but don't want to do," Fiore explains. With your mind cleared because you're not feeling helpless and controlled, it's easier to face your task in the present rather than relegate it to the future. So forget "I have to start exercising" and tell yourself "I choose to walk for 20 minutes today on my lunch hour."

3 learn to say no

"Over-doers generally have difficulty saying 'no' because they want to please people," says Sapadin. Unfortunately, the result is often a to-do list so overwhelming that you can't possibly get to everything on it. So you put off things that are important to you in favor of fulfilling promises to family members, friends and co-workers.

It's far better to decline excess requests up front. "You can do it graciously. It doesn't make you a selfish person," says Sapadin. "And saying no to your children sometimes can be extremely healthy for them, because too many kids today feel entitled to what-

seriously blocked

While everyone puts off certain things, about 20 to 25 percent of adults are chronic procrastinators, says Ferrari. "Procrastination is their lifestyle. They do it not only at work but also at home and in their personal life." If a chronic procrastinator has a list of 12 things to do, for example, she may tackle one task and then decide to reshuffle the list or start making copies of it. She's caught in a vicious cycle of avoiding important tasks. For her, Ferrari says, cognitive behavioral therapy is recommended. So if procrastination is putting your job, your relationships and your happiness at risk, don't wait. Schedule an appointment with a knowledgeable psychologist today.

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Veggie Cheese Dip

Ingredients:

- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil
- 2 c. quartered cherry tomatoes
- 1 1/2 c. roughly chopped fresh spinach
- 1/2 c. diced green bell pepper
- 1/2 c. diced red onion
- 2 1/2 c. diced button mushrooms
- 1 c. fresh sweet corn kernels
(can substitute frozen corn)
- 1 15 1/2-oz. jar of TOSTITOS®
Reduced Fat Zesty Cheese Dip
- 1 Tbsp. roughly chopped fresh parsley

Directions:

Heat oil in nonstick pan over high heat.

Add tomatoes, spinach, peppers, onions, mushrooms and corn and sauté for four minutes.

Meanwhile, pour TOSTITOS® Reduced Fat Zesty Cheese Dip into a microwave-safe bowl and microwave for 30 seconds or until warm.

Remove bowl from microwave and stir in vegetables and parsley.

Serve immediately with TOSTITOS® Multigrain Tortilla Chips and a side of fresh broccoli florets.

Serves 4-6

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health

Scheduled downtime actually makes you more efficient because without guilt, you're able to relax and recharge.

ever they want." In fact, doing less can also benefit the other adults in your life by encouraging them to be more independent and self-reliant.

4 make a few more lists

It seems counterintuitive: Won't more lists make you feel even more overwhelmed and stuck? Actually, the opposite is often true. "If you have only one list with 87 things on it, you feel like a failure at the end of the day," says Stack. "If you add up all the time for those tasks, it's completely unrealistic." Her solution is to keep one master list as a memory device so that low-priority and big-picture items don't clutter your daily list. Use the master each night to make the next day's action plan, picking no more than five priority tasks that are doable in a day. Highlight one or two tasks that you absolutely must finish and in the morning tackle those first. The sense of accomplishment will speed you through your day. Keep your main list out of sight and out of mind except when you're referring to it.

5 schedule guilt-free downtime

Hold on—are we giving you permission to procrastinate? Not exactly. While counseling students at the University of California, Berkeley, Fiore discovered something surprising. "The people who scheduled downtime got more done than the ones who just had an open calendar and felt like they were always suffering, always working," he says. "Scheduled, guilt-free play actually makes you more productive and more efficient." Why?

When you plan things like a half hour with a juicy novel, a craft project or a phone chat with a friend, you give yourself permission to fully enjoy it. Without energy-depleting guilt, you're able to recharge and come back to your work refreshed.

6 recruit a ruthless friend

Have someone to check in with as you're moving toward a goal. "She has to be someone who won't let you get away with things," says Stack. "It's her job to bug you about your progress." Schedule regular chats; each time tell her exactly what you plan to accomplish by your next meeting. Be sure that your goal is specific and measurable. Instead of pledging to start looking for a new job, for example, say you'll finish updating your résumé so she can look it over.

7 give yourself rewards

Whenever you check off a task—no matter how small—give yourself a little treat. You could even plan your rewards by writing them next to the items on your to-do list. You order the paint for the front steps and you can read a few chapters of a novel. You finally schedule your ob-gyn appointment and you get to e-mail a friend to set up a lunch date. If you do nothing else, at least take time to sit back, close your eyes and enjoy that wonderful feeling of accomplishment that completing even a tiny task can bring. It might just give you the inspiration you need to keep chipping away at the one big thing on your list that really matters to you. ●