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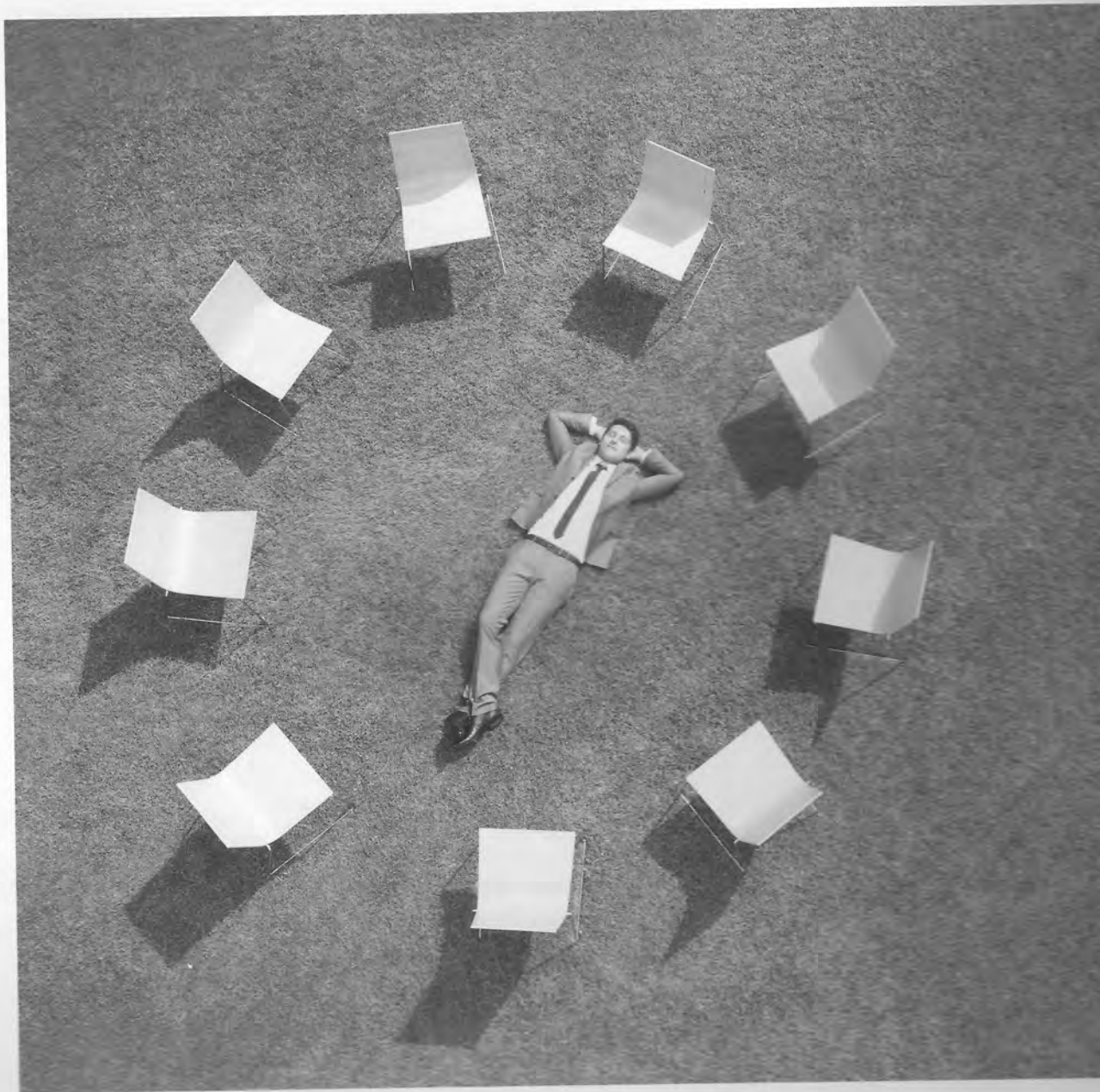
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Get a Grip on Procrastination

Use these tips to get going on what you want to get done

By Wendy J. Meyeroff



Sometimes, putting things off can be a good thing. Maybe you need to step away from an angry email you composed, and then come back and reread it with a calmer heart before sending (or not sending) it. Or you could pause before buying your next item online, because you know it's an impulse purchase and you need to think on it. But when every reason—no matter how strong—gets you to delay and delay and nothing gets done, that's a psychological issue: procrastination.

Technically, procrastination means “to delay the task initiation or completion despite expecting to be worse off for doing so.” Now researchers, with the help of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), know that procrastinators have distinctly different brains.

In 2018, researchers in Germany published a study in *Psychological Science* about the biology of procrastination. The biopsychologists examined 264 women and men with an MRI scanner and noted significant changes in amygdala volume and the functional resting-state connectivity between the amygdala and the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex—two areas linked to action control—related to “decision-related action orientation” (AOD). The reduced functional connectivity changes associated with lower AOD scores are linked with a reduced ability to filter out interfering emotions and distractions, which can undermine self-regulation.

Creating a time to do the thing you are putting off gives you an essential trigger to get started.

Fortunately, the brain is ever-changing and can reshape itself as we reshape our habits. To this end, you can ward off procrastination by taking stock of your weaknesses and dealing with them.

For most people, a major weakness point is today's screen technology. The profusion of apps and social media offers an enticing blend of triggering emotions like fear, awe, and anger, combined with the promise of novelty. We are compelled to keep exploring the news, checking out online shopping sales, playing games, looking at aspirational photos on Instagram, or indulging a myriad of other distractions.

Worse, this “cyber leisure” isn't true leisure; it doesn't usually relax or restore us. Rather, it offers an addictive distraction perfectly calibrated to entice procrastinators.

Implement Simple Steps

Conquering procrastination doesn't require an instant major life overhaul. Almost nothing works that way, and those kinds of life-changing goals can seem overwhelming, advise experts.

“Saying, ‘I'm going to lose 60 pounds in two months,’ is not realistic. So, make your goals attainable, keeping the end goal in mind,” says Wayne Parnell, who has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and heads success coaching consultancy DynamicLeader, Inc.

He advises chopping up those big goals and creating a realistic timeline, like losing that weight over the course of a year. Then add a more immediate action step with a positive touch, like going for a walk and telling yourself, “Today, this heavy body is moving toward the lighter, leaner, thinner body I'm creating,” he says.

Aim at the Heart of the Task

Many procrastinators ruin their schedules by “bike-shedding,” notes Melinda Palmer, a teacher of applied behavioral economics at Texas A&M University's Human Behavior Lab. That means focusing on trivial tasks, like cleaning the bike shed, rather than important tasks.

“You feel like you can't possibly start that big, important thing until you resolve some moderately related smaller thing first,” explains Palmer. “So, a procrastinator might say things like, ‘I can't update my website until I look at all 8,579 templates that exist to ensure I am picking the perfect one,’ or, ‘I can't clean out my closet until I lose 10 pounds.’”

These are just ways to procrastinate. Keep clear on what you are trying to accomplish.

Set a Schedule and Keep It

Creating a time to do the thing you are putting off gives you an essential trigger to get started. Clear the deck and make sure you don't have any distractions so you can focus on that one thing you've kept putting off.

And be realistic about how much of it you can actually accomplish. You are likely setting yourself up for failure if you expect to grind away for eight hours and plough through the entire task.

“We can really only work in bursts of 60–90 minutes in any kind of productive, effective way,” says Heather Hersh, PsyD, a well-being consultant and coach.

After working on the thing you don't want to do, reward yourself, she advises. It's almost like parenting yourself toward more responsible behavior. “You engage in a less desired behavior, and then you allow yourself to engage in a more desired behavior,” she says. “You did homework and then you could go outside and play. With trying to be productive, you could have these 60- to 90-minute bursts and then allow yourself, as a reward,

to look for that new sweater that you want.”

And be realistic about how much you can do in one day. “I was working with a coaching client, and she would have like 13 things on her to-do list in a day. Then she’d beat herself up and feel really bad about herself because she didn’t get everything done on her list,” says Hersh. She had to teach that client to set more realistic goals, which she says is usually only three in any one day.

Focus on Smaller Chunks of Progress

Set small goals to get yourself moving. It’s not about making a massive change; it’s about consistently moving forward.

“If you want to be healthier, setting aside an hour for the gym or working out can be put off over and over” despite your healthy ambitions, says Palmer. “If you instead say, ‘I will do one squat when I brush my teeth,’ or while you wait for your coffee to heat up in the microwave, that can add up.”

It’s really about consistency rather than making a massive change. Your goal is to have the new behavior become easy to do. Just like rolling a big rock, the hardest part is to get it moving. You can pick up speed as you go.

Train Your Friends and Family

Our loved ones often mean well when they call, text, and email us, but sometimes that can get us off track when we are trying to get that difficult task done. Linda Sapadin, Ph.D., the author of “How to Beat Procrastination in the Digital Age,” warns that some people are especially vulnerable to these kinds of distractions. Sapadin describes six kinds of procrastinators, including “The Pleaser,” who is so intent on making others happy that they end up with insufficient time to tend to their own needs.

“Don’t hesitate to say ‘No’ to others,” says Sapadin—just say it in a pleasant tone. You could say, “I’ll be happy to speak with you later. After 7 p.m. would be great, because then I’ll have the time to chat,” she says.

Don’t let other people become your excuse to put something off that is weighing on your mind. It may be more pleasant to help your friend with a task, but if you’ve set that time to finally organize your finances, then tell them you can help them later.

Factor in Online and Social Media Time

The internet is the archenemy of procrastinators everywhere. Companies spend millions developing algorithms and artificial intelligence with the sole purpose of grabbing your eyeballs for as long as possible. Anticipate the problem and prepare yourself.

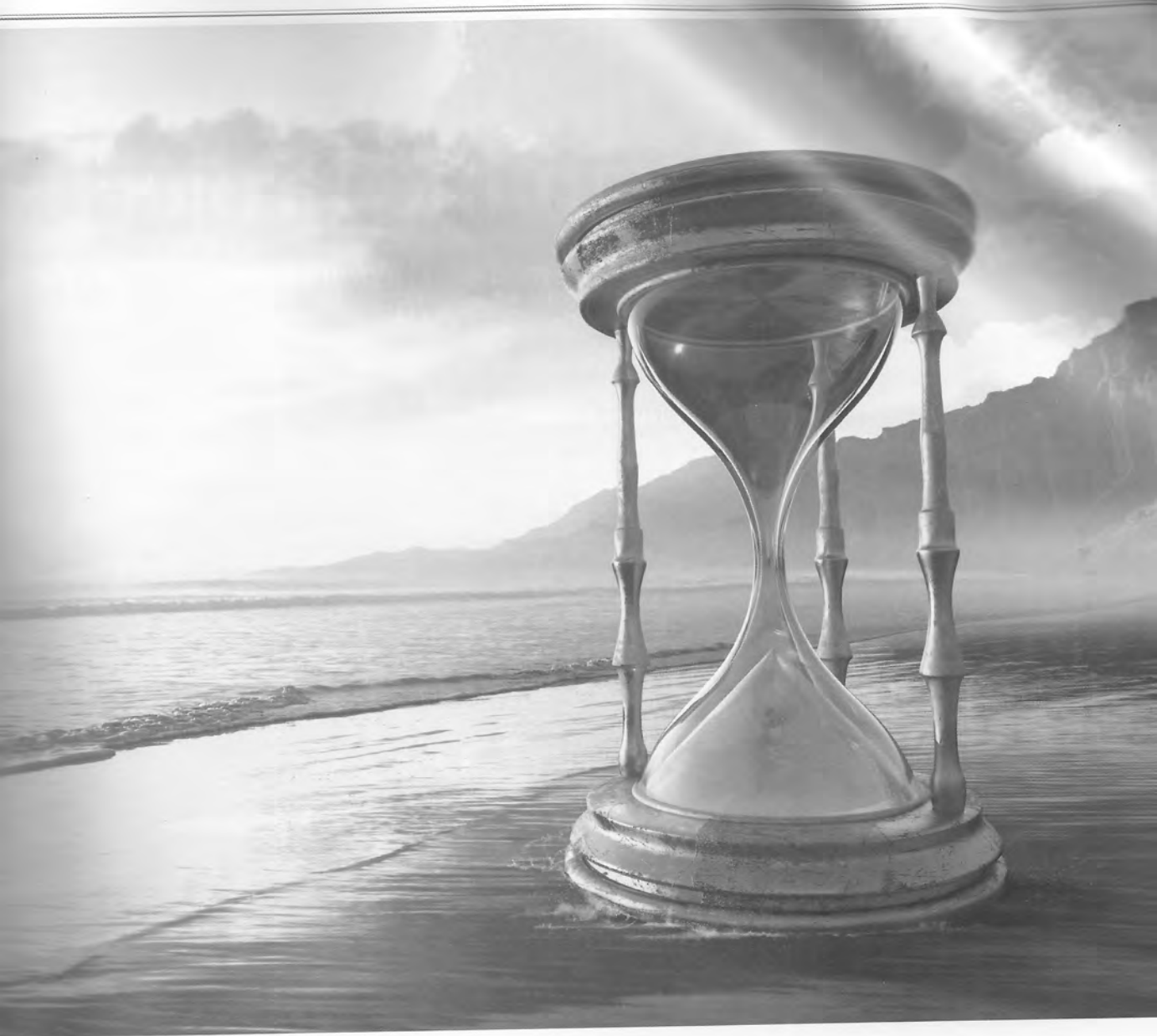
To remove distractions that encourage procrastination, Pernell suggests saying to yourself, “I need a plan so that I don’t spend much time checking my email or looking at whatever on my phone,” he says. “You do what’s called ‘block time,’ setting specific time parameters to focus on one thing at a time.”

That means knowing your distraction points, like checking email, and managing them by keeping that time to a specific schedule—a kind of firewall to protect the rest of your time.

Notice Your Jump Point

One of the most important ways to deal with procrastination is to gain a deeper sense of self-awareness about how you respond to the difficult feelings triggered by the task you are procrastinating on. Usually, we set out to do the difficult task, then the uncomfortable feelings arise and we jump to something easier. This jump point is where you want to change what you do.

Often, when we think of that important project or task, we feel uncomfortable because of uncertainty about how to accomplish the task or because we doubt our ability to complete it. Instead of staying with the difficult feeling and making whatever progress is possible, we procrastinate. Learning to accept and tolerate those difficult feelings is the most essential way to get past our procrastination tendencies.



Simply put, when you notice you are about to jump away from your task, pause and take note of the difficult feelings. Stay with the task a little longer despite the discomfort. Each time you do this, you increase your ability to endure those uncomfortable feelings and stay on your important task.

Although an innate procrastinator, Wendy J. Meyeroff has been a health reporter, ghostwriter, and web custom content provider for 20+ years, meeting deadlines for worldwide clients that include CBS, Senior Wire News Syndicate, GetMeGiddy.com, and numerous magazines including Good Housekeeping, Graduating Nurse, and Weight Watchers. See her website at WMMedComm.com