



SCIENCE

# Endless procrastination syndrome

What defines a procrastinator? Are procrastinators just lazy people who don't want to do what they need to right away? No! In fact, scientists claim that procrastinators are victims of a habit that can ruin their life.

BY KATARZYNA BURDA



**urgent errand**

– pilna sprawa do załatwienia  
to fulfill duties

– wypełniać obowiązki

to implement goals on time

– realizować cele na czas (w terminie)

to put sth off

– odkładać coś na później

procrastination

– prokrastynacja, zwlekanie, odkładanie spraw na później

plain laziness

– zwyczajne lenistwo

constant

postponing of

tasks – wieczne odkładanie zadań, odwlekanie ich wykonania

amygdala – ciało migdałowate

dorsal anterior cingulate cortex

– grzbietowy obszar przedniego zakrętu kory obřęczy

to suppress

feelings – tłumić uczucia

avoid anxiety

– unikać lęku / uciekać przed lękiem

neuroticism

– neurotyczność

agreeableness

– ugodowość

conscientiousness

– sumienność

susceptibility to

stress – podatność na stres

perseverance

– wytrwałość

low self-esteem

– niskie poczucie własnej wartości

to fall into

a psychological

trap – wpaść

w psychologiczną pułapkę

**F**or as long as he can remember, Adam has been writing lists and notes on pieces of paper: goals to achieve, things to do in a given week, **urgent errands** to run, and tests that need to be done at the doctor's office. Over the more than 40 years of his life, he's collected a whole box of them. So, how many of these tasks did he eventually complete? "Almost none, and certainly not in the time that I planned to do them," he says, regretfully. He isn't even able to stick to a plan he made for the day upon waking. "After battling with myself, I do the most urgent things, but at the end of the day, I realize that I've wasted most of my time sitting at the computer and browsing Facebook instead of dealing with important things. I really would like to motivate myself, but I can't," he explains.

There are many people like him in the modern world. Researchers estimate that up to 20 percent of us have problems **fulfilling duties** and **implementing goals on time**, simply because we **put them off**, for no specific reason. Some are notorious at this. Psychologists call this behavior **procrastination**, although most people would view it as **plain laziness**. "Procrastination is not the same thing," maintains Dr. Rafał Albiński, a psychologist at SWPS University. "A lazy person doesn't usually have a problem with the fact that they don't feel like doing something, while a procrastinator is the opposite; this **constant postponing of tasks** really makes them suffer," he explains.

Scientists are treating procrastination more and more seriously, and new research shows that it can be associated with abnormal brain function and personality disorders that require therapy. There are even ideas around on how to treat chronic procrastinators.

### I'm afraid of what will come of it

To explore the essence of endless procrastination, scientists decided to look at the brains of people with procrastination problems and compare them with those of people who usually do what they need to immediately. A study involving 264 volunteers was undertaken by the Biopsychology Department of Ruhr-University Bochum. After conducting psychological tests, researchers, led by Prof. Onur Güntürkün, divided the volunteers into groups of "procrastinators" and "doers," then examined them using MRI. The differences between the two groups were visible in two areas of the brain: the **amygdala** and the **dorsal anterior cingulate cortex** (ACC). The procrastinators had larger amygdala with fewer nerve connections to the ACC than those classed as doers.

According to the researchers, important conclusions can be drawn from this study that will help us better understand the problem of procrastination. The primary function of the amygdala is to evaluate activities in terms of their results and to warn against their negative consequences. The ACC then processes this information in order to choose the best course of action, and what's more, it **suppresses feelings** and emotions (e.g. fear) that could interfere with the implementation of the plan. "People with a larger than normal amygdala may feel more anxiety and concern about the negative consequences of their actions, which is why they tend to postpone them," explains Dr Erhan Genc, co-author of this discovery. "In addition, poorer communication between the amygdala and the ACC doesn't allow them to suppress negative emotions and makes it difficult to decide on a single course of action.

This study confirms the earlier findings of psychologists, who see the root of procrastination as being not laziness but fear. "Procrastination is a habit based on **avoiding anxiety**," says Dr Albiński. What are such people afraid of? "Many things, for example that they won't achieve success, that their actions will be negatively judged by those around them, or that they'll be disappointed with themselves. Sometimes, they're also scared of success, which can have various consequences, for example a promotion at work," explains Dr Albiński.

The anxious nature of procrastinators can become apparent in a personality study that defines the level of five main traits that shape who we are and how we behave. These traits—known as the Big Five—are extraversion, **neuroticism**, openness to new experiences, **agreeableness** and **conscientiousness**. "Procrastinators are usually high in neuroticism, which is associated with anxiety and **susceptibility to stress**, and low in conscientiousness, which determines the level of **perseverance**, motivation and organization in actions aimed at achieving a goal," explains Dr Albiński. One of the researchers of this habit, Prof. Piers Steel from the University of Calgary, adds that "Procrastinators have **low self-esteem** and great doubts as to whether they'll be able to perform a task well, but this has nothing to do with perfectionism. Perfectionists rarely delay performing tasks, even though they're afraid of the result even more than procrastinators," he explains.

### Everything's falling apart

Even though procrastinators feel relieved after postponing something, they **fall into a psychological trap**. "This relief is instant gratification, which is very tempting for procrastinators. They then behave like a child who prefers to eat one piece of candy right then and there instead of get-



## *Procrastination can be associated with abnormal brain function and personality disorders that require therapy*

ting a delicious chocolate at the end of the day,” explains Dr Albiński.

However, the relief from postponing the task eventually passes, and tension and frustration with themselves takes its place. Procrastinators often experience these feelings, and this worsens their quality of life, as was shown by scientists at Case Western Reserve University in one of the first major studies on procrastination in 1997. They invited university students to participate in the study, and started by using a special questionnaire—the so-called Procrastination Scale—to determine their inclination to procrastinate. Then, they monitored their academic performance, stress levels and overall health throughout the semester. During the semester, procrastinators had a lower level of stress than the second group, probably because they were putting off their studies and exams. However, at the end of the semester, the situation reversed: the procrastinators achieved lower scores in their studies, were more stressed, and were more likely to see a doctor than those who had been doing their tasks straight away.

Sometimes, the habit of procrastination can have

a really **dire effect** on physical health. This is particularly true with bedtime procrastination, which—according to doctors—is becoming **the scourge of our time**. Despite being tired, we continue reading, watching TV and having one last look online. As research at the Utrecht University shows, over half of Europeans **fall prey** to this at least twice a week. People experiencing bedtime procrastination suffer from concentration disorders and have a greater tendency to **obesity** than people who go to bed before midnight.

### **Freeing the desire to act**

Even someone who's very talented at putting things off eventually has to **face the issues** they were so fiercely avoiding. “And then it turns out that taking action was much simpler than the avoidance. People often feel relieved, and think, ‘Why was I fighting it so much instead of just doing it?’” says Dr Albiński.

However, researchers think that it's difficult to change procrastinators into 100 percent doers, especially since, in chronic procrastinators, these behaviors result from a different brain structure. “We still need to check whether these changes can be neutralized using appropriate psychological training or brain stimulation,” say the scientists from Ruhr-University Bochum.

However, it's definitely possible to work on procrastination using various techniques proposed by psychologists. A good example is the small-steps method: psychologists recommend **breaking down a task** into smaller activities and setting deadlines for each stage. “You can also motivate yourself by giving yourself rewards for completing each step that brings you closer to the goal, or play a game with yourself by placing a bet on how much time you'll need to complete the task,” suggests Dr Albiński.

Very often, the biggest problem for procrastinators is actually getting started. “A simple but very effective technique can help. Say to yourself: ‘OK, I'll start doing it, but only for a few minutes, and then I'll put it off,’” says Dr Albiński. “Then, it's much easier to sit down and work, and once you start, you learn that you don't actually have to stop. I've tried this many times on myself,” the psychologist says, with a smile.

These methods work when procrastination is not chronic, for example if we're putting off going to the post office or starting to write a scientific paper. “In this case, it's rarely an anxiety disorder; we just don't feel like it,” says Dr Albiński. But, if your procrastination is due to fear or a desire to escape, psychotherapy is an option that could help you identify the source of your fears. **NL**

**dire effect**  
– zgubny wpływ  
**scourge of our time**  
– plaga / zhora  
naszych czasów  
**to fall prey to sth**  
– paść ofiarą  
czegoś  
**obesity** – otyłość  
**to face the issues**  
– zmierzyć się  
z problemami  
**to break down**  
**a task** – tu:  
podzielić zadanie  
na mniejsze  
czynności  
(wykonywać  
zadanie etapami)

## Task 1

Read the text and answer the following questions:

1. What does Adam do to help him remember things he needs to do, and why does he usually end up disappointed?
2. What is the difference between a lazy person and a procrastinator?
3. What research did Prof. Onur Güntürkün's team carry out and what did they discover?
4. What earlier findings did the research confirm?
5. What can we learn about procrastinators from the "Big Five" personality study?
6. How do procrastinators tend to feel right after postponing something, and how do their feelings change later on?
7. Why is bedtime procrastination particularly unhealthy?
8. How can we overcome procrastination?

## Task 3



Describe the issue presented in the article. Use the expressions listed below. They will help you give structure to the text analysis.

### key words:

procrastination  
Prof. Onur Güntürkün's research  
anxiety  
physical health  
small-steps method

### collocations with positive meaning:

important conclusions  
best course of action  
promotion at work  
openness to new experiences  
instant gratification

### collocations with negative meaning:

plain laziness  
constant postponing  
abnormal brain function  
personality disorders  
susceptibility to stress  
low self-esteem  
dire effect  
anxiety disorder

### action verb phrases:

stick to a plan  
deal with important things  
fulfill duties  
implement goals on time  
conduct psychological tests  
delay performing tasks  
fall into a psychological trap  
face the issues

## Task 2

VIDEO

Watch the video and answer the following questions:



1. How can dividing a task into steps help you overcome procrastination?
2. What is the Pomodoro technique?
3. How does the technique help the man in the video to get started on his work?
4. Why is it recommended to set the bar low?
5. Why should you reward yourself when you have completed a task?

WATCH!

QR kod: look how to use at page 4



**Record your text analysis on a voice recorder or practice delivering your presentation in a group setting.**

Examples:

For as long as he can remember, Adam...

Over the more than 40 years of his life, he's...

He isn't even able to stick to a plan he...

There are many people like him...

**Task 4**

Translate the sentences below using the suggested word or phrase.

**(remember ... been)** Adam, od kiedy pamięta, zapisuje na kawałkach papieru listy i notatki: cele do osiągnięcia, rzeczy do zrobienia w danym tygodniu.

**(has)** Przez ponad 40 lat życia zebrał ich całe pudło.

**(complete)** Ile z tych zadań ostatecznie ukończył?

**(none ... certainly ...regretfully)** – Prawie żadnego, a już na pewno nie w terminie, w którym zaplanowałem ich wykonanie – mówi z żalem.

**(motivate)** Naprawdę chciałbym się zmotywować, ale nie potrafię – wyjaśnia.

You can use your translations in your presentation of the topic (in Task 6).

**Task 5**

Continue the translation using the suggested word or phrase. Remember: It's not about translating these sentences perfectly—there are a number of possible ways to translate each sentence. This task aims to teach you **TO THINK IN ENGLISH**. By working on your translation of a sentence, you can change it to get closer to the sense of the original (see Key).



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Takich osób jak on jest wiele **in the modern world**.

Naukowcy szacują, że **up to 20 percent of us** ma problemy z wypełnianiem obowiązków i realizowaniem celów **on time**, **simply because** odkładamy je na później **for no specific reason**.

**Some** robią to notorycznie.

Psychologowie nazywają to **behavior procrastination**, chociaż większość ludzi **would view it as** zwyczajne lenistwo.

Prokrastynacja to jednak nie to samo – **maintains** dr Rafał Albiński, psycholog z Uniwersytetu SWPS.

Leniwa osoba nie ma zazwyczaj problemu z tym, że czegoś nie chce jej się zrobić, **while a procrastinator** przeciwnie.

You can use your translations in your presentation of the topic (in Task 6).

**Task 6**



Now it's time to put forward your views on the issues.

**Record your speech on a voice recorder** or practice presenting your opinion in a group setting.

Consider the issues raised in the text from these viewpoints:

**Personal:** A procrastinator  
Adam is not so different from...  
Like many of us, he...

**Scientific:** Anxiety  
According to scientists, procrastination is...  
There is a direct connection between...

**Medical:** Physical health  
In some cases, procrastination can affect...  
For instance, bedtime procrastination...

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