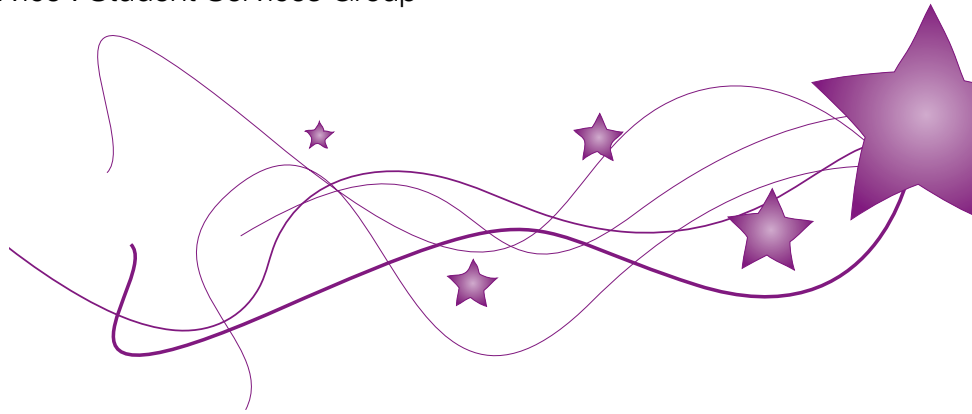


Overcoming Procrastination



Procrastination is the behaviour of delaying or postponing. For many students delaying tasks may not be a problem as they choose to delay tasks which are of low priority for them or they consciously choose to delay in order to give themselves more time to consider a problem. For others, procrastination becomes a regular way of “coping”, which results in a cycle of stress that becomes difficult to break.

DEALING WITH PROBLEM PROCRASTINATION

There are three steps in the process of overcoming procrastination:

1. Becoming aware of the reasons why you procrastinate.
2. Identifying the tasks on which you commonly delay, and your particular style of procrastination.
3. Developing appropriate strategies to change the behaviour.

WHY DO YOU PROCRASTINATE?

There are many reasons for procrastination which can be broadly classified as follows:

- a) Holding irrational beliefs and carrying messages from the past about your performance and abilities.
- b) Having unclear goals and difficulties with decision making.

A. IRRATIONAL BELIEFS AND MESSAGES FROM THE PAST

Many students hold irrational beliefs about the ways things “should be”. These beliefs, initially may seem quite reasonable, but can prevent students from getting even the simplest task started or completed.

The following are examples of these beliefs:

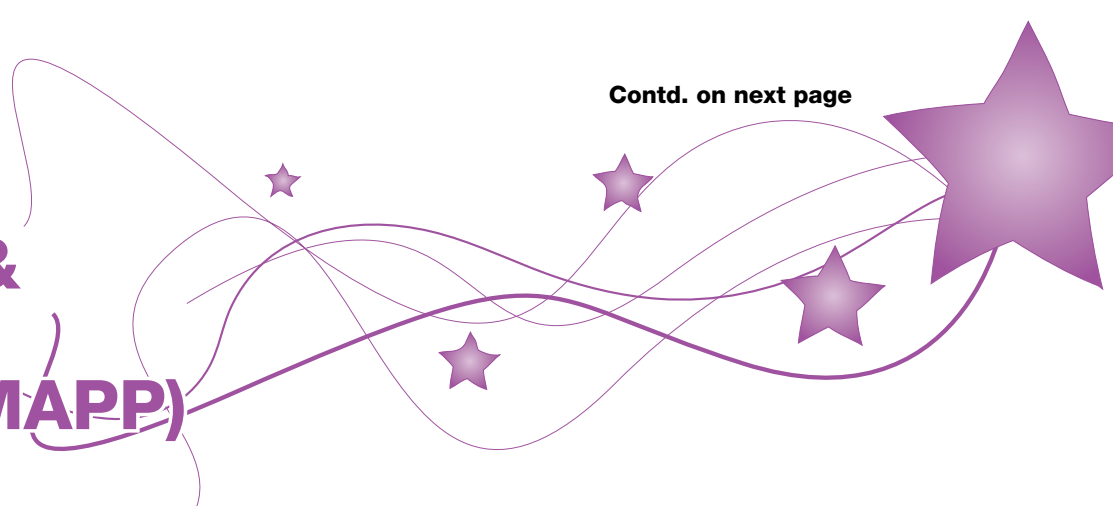
- I must be perfect and do things perfectly.
- Everything I do should go easily and without effort.
- It's safer to do nothing than to risk and fail.
- I should have no limitations.
- If it's not done right, it's not worth doing.
- I must avoid being challenged.
- If I succeed then someone will get hurt.
- If I do well this time then I will always have to do well.
- Following someone else's rules means I'm giving in and am not in control.
- I can't afford to let go of anything or anyone.
- If I expose my real self then people won't like me.
- There is a right answer and I'll wait until I find it.

(Burke & Yuen, 1983, Procrastination, Addison Wesley: Massachusetts.)

Most of these beliefs have formed through past experiences and messages received from others (eg. parents, teachers, etc.). These messages often involve pressures to succeed or doubts about abilities (eg. “you'll never make a go of anything”). They have been internalised and are carried ready to be activated when a particular task is attempted.

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Maximising Academic & Personal Potential (MAPP)



Overcoming Procrastination



Which of these beliefs do you hold?

Can you identify messages which you carry about your performance and abilities?

Being aware of these beliefs and reviewing them may assist in overcoming delaying behaviour. In some cases they are so embedded that it may be necessary to seek the assistance of a Counsellor to clarify what you want to achieve and how you can overcome the obstacles.

MAINTAINING AN ILLUSION OF BRILLIANCE

Some students leave work until the last minute, then under high stress; rush it up for the deadline. They often argue that they need the added stress to get it done. They tell themselves, and perhaps others, that it wasn't their best work as they did it at the last minute. They content themselves with the result and maintain the illusion that had they started it earlier it would have been better, perhaps even a credit or distinction, who knows, who will ever know? Procrastination allows some people to take comfort in believing that their ability is greater than their performance indicates.

B. HAVING UNCLEAR GOALS AND DIFFICULTIES WITH DECISION MAKING

Most students lead complex lives with a range of competing commitments and must constantly make decisions about what to do, when to do it and what must be left undone as there is frequently not enough time to do everything they need and/or want to do.

Effective decisions are usually based on a clear understanding of what you want for yourself now and in the future. There will often be choices to be made between pleasurable options, which will give immediate satisfaction such as phoning a friend, and more difficult tasks which will take time and effort and may be frustrating, but will contribute to an important longer term goal. For example, an assignment which will contribute towards passing that year and ultimately completing the course, being independent and so on.

CLARIFYING YOUR GOALS

Write down your goals for the next six months, and longer term goals. Remember, goals are what you want for yourself. Include study and career goals as well as personal, relationship and leisure goals. Write them down boldly and place them in a prominent place. Consider what you will need to do to achieve them. Reviewing them can assist you in making decisions about the best way to use the time available to you. Your goals will change so review and rewrite them regularly.

Set fifteen minutes aside regularly each week to consider priorities for the coming week. It is possible to use some of your diversions and other social and leisure activities as rewards for completing a long term, difficult task.

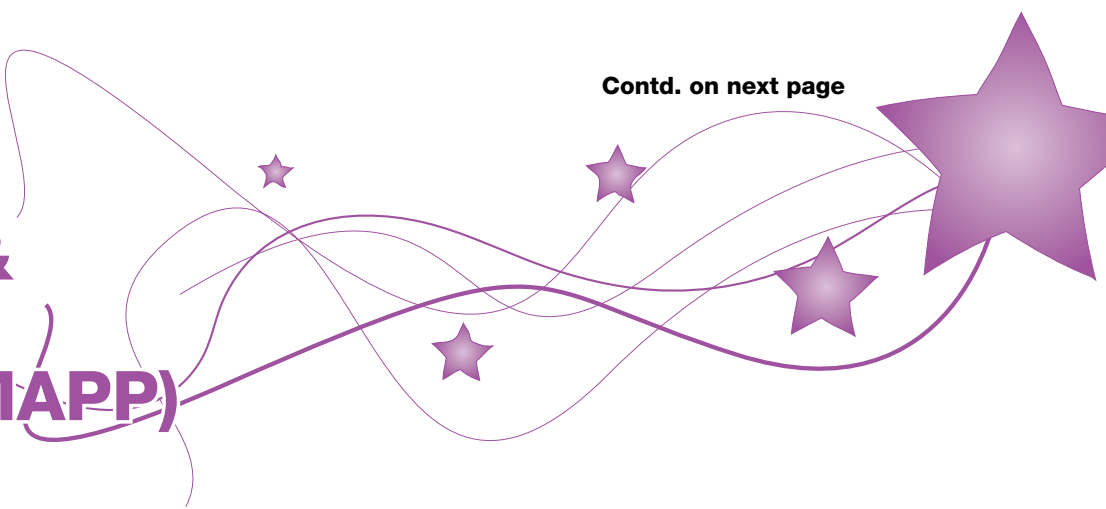
DECISION MAKING

You may have five tasks you could be doing, but can't settle down to begin any of them, you hover from one to another, not completing any or gaining any satisfaction, or you might avoid all because the decision is too difficult.

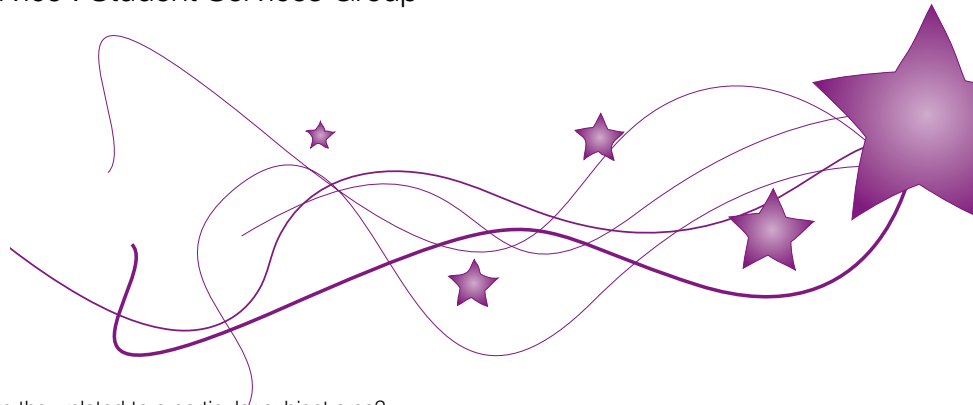
When this occurs, choose one task and work on it non-stop for 15 minutes then reconsider what you want to do. Committing yourself to one task involves foregoing temporarily other options but indecision wastes valuable time and energy. So commit yourself to one task and enjoy the satisfaction of completion.

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Maximising Academic & Personal Potential (MAPP)



Overcoming Procrastination



HOW DO YOU PROCRASTINATE?

- What are the tasks which you frequently delay doing? Are they related to a particular subject area?
- Do they involve a particular skill, for example; writing, drawing, problem solving, reading, etc.
- What do you do instead of the tasks?
- Make a list of your favourite diversions eg. making cups of coffee, phoning friends, watching TV, etc.

DEALING WITH DIVERSIONS

Put your list of diversions in a prominent place in your study area. When you feel an urge for a diversion coming on, delay it for 5 minutes, then decide what is most important for you to do right then.

You may also use paradox to over-emphasise the situation. If you want to eat, have a cup of coffee, etc., say to yourself, "You poor thing you might faint, or something worse if you don't have it right now!"

Procrastination, like any habit can be difficult to overcome. It is important to consider what purpose it serves for you. Delaying may cause stress but there may be other pay-offs for you. Consider how your life might change if you were to stop procrastinating. What are the risks for you?

Having considered how and why you procrastinate, select one task on which you would like to focus. Consider the blocks to completion and chart your progress over two weeks. Reward yourself for any improvement. Focus on what you have achieved rather than what you did not accomplish.

Initially written by Leonie Elphinstone, modified by Philomena Holman and Darko Hajzler

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. This is a free and confidential service to students of RMIT. The Counselling Service can be contacted at the following location between 9 am and 5 pm.

City Campus

Building 43
54 Cardigan Street
9925 4365

Tivoli (Bourke St)

Building 108
Level 4
9925 4365

Brunswick

Building 514
Level 2
9925 4365

Bundoora

Building 202
Level 3
9925 4365

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