Welcome to Longwood, incoming freshman! We all know that the first few weeks of college can be a little overwhelming: just as you are expected to absorb a seemingly endless stream of information, you must at the same time adjust to a new environment, living conditions, independence, and friends. The transition between high school and college is a critical one, and often an extremely difficult one to make. While you find your work load growing and pressures for success building, you will be forced to confront and engage with a newfound freedom and an environment full of distractions.

Procrastination is a plague among college students, and very soon the vast majority of you will have to come to terms with it. Even though you have your hands full, this brief guide is worth your time.

**Why this matters to you:**

1. *Because it is extremely common:* Though it is common in every aspect of society, studies have shown that college students are particularly susceptible to procrastination.

   (Above): In his article “The Nature of Procrastination”, Piers Steel cites that “80%–95% of college students engage in procrastination (Ellis & Knaus, 1977; O’Brien, 2002), approximately 75% consider themselves procrastinators (Potts, 1987), and almost 50% procrastinate consistently and problematically (Day, Mensink, & O’Sullivan, 2000)” (65).
These statistics hold true for Longwood University as well. In a small anonymous survey conducted more locally, among Longwood freshmen, procrastination was found to take a significant academic toll:

82.9% of LU freshmen argue that procrastination affects their academics

2. Because data shows that procrastination has more negative effects than you might expect:

- First, and most obviously, procrastination results in significantly lowered grades:
  - Studies find a “consistently negative relationship between academic performance and procrastination” (Steel 80).
  - In a study conducted in Ohio State University (see graph below), “the most severe procrastinators earned an average grade in the class of 2.9 on a 4.0 scale. Moderate procrastinators had average grades of 3.4, while low procrastinators scored an average of 3.6” (Grabmeier).

- Additionally, procrastination takes an incredibly negative toll on mental health:
  - A Longwood survey sample found that indirect results of procrastination include heightened stress levels, anxiety, depression, frustration and anger, and lowered self-esteem.
  - In particular, studies indicate that a “statistically significant negative correlation was found between procrastination and self-esteem” (Marium Saleem and Rafia Rafique, 52).
  - In addition, procrastinators suffer from “significantly higher rates of digestive ailments, insomnia, and cold and flu symptoms… unhealthy sleep, diet, and exercise patterns… [and] higher levels of drinking and smoking” (Glenn).
  - Finally, procrastinators even reported to have lower life satisfaction scores than non-procrastinators (Özer, 1).

- Furthermore, habitual procrastinators may find unexpected side-effects down the line:
  - Studies show correlations between chronic procrastination and health and financial later in life (Steel 80).

[Procrastination/Grade Correlation graph]
Understanding your Procrastination:

In order to develop good efficacy habits, we need to understand why we procrastinate. The reasons why we procrastinate can vary widely between each individual, but the reasons below are some of the more common underlying psychological causes of chronic procrastination. Further individual research into personal underlying causes may be helpful for your individual case.

- **Fear of Failure**: Perhaps most often, procrastination stems from a fear of failure. In the face of an assignment or task, anxieties like these often arise when we care most, when we feel the pressure to succeed. Unfortunately, we often consciously or subconsciously deflect the assignment in order to avoid this feeling (The Writing Center).

- **Fear of Success**: Believe it or not, one of the leading causes of procrastination is the fear of success. These kinds of procrastinators might fear that fully investing themselves in a project and producing good results will cause heightened expectations and outside pressures. They may also fear that success will affect their personality, making them less social and friendly, or that their work will become the center of their life. They sabotage themselves in order to avoid these falsely presumed consequences of their potential success (The Writing Center).

- **Perfectionism/ Unreasonable self-expectations**: Many people set extremely unreasonable and nightmarish expectations for themselves, which then terrify them because they feel unable to meet them. Often, these individuals will procrastinate because it gives them an out- they then have an excuse for poor work because they can reassure themselves that, given more time, they could have met their expectations. Mentally this allows them to avoid the prospect of doing badly on work that they truly invested themselves in, and disappointing themselves. These types of people also often lack the ability to gauge their progress; until they are done with a project or an assignment, they are overwhelmed and feel as if they have accomplished little (The Writing Center).

- **Avoidant coping styles**: In other words, “the tendency to neglect problems that cause anxiety rather than confront them” (Glenn). In the face of the fear and anxieties listed above, some people only feel better when they tackle the source and take steps to overcome it. Many people, however, are compelled to handle that stress by simply avoiding it and pushing it back for later due to their avoidant coping styles. This inevitably results in a tidal wave of stressors later, when they are then forced to confront them all at once.
Techniques to combat your procrastination:

Planning and Organization:

- Taking the time to plan ahead and organize your thoughts is critical. Many people, especially procrastinators, believe that diving straight into a project, is the best way to go, but this concept (known as “plunging”) can be problematic. In “The Procrastinator’s Handbook” (Emmett 137) argues that:
  - Not planning increases the probability that things will go wrong and that the project will take longer, as you encounter unforeseen problems or find yourself unprepared.
  - These continual roadblocks hampering your progress cause aggravation, increasing the likelihood that a person just gives up on the project.
  - The negativity that you associate with the project as a result of these issues also makes it more difficult for you to force yourself to work on it.

- Writing lists: This is probably the most common procrastination tip, for good reason. Writing out a list can destress you and make work more manageable in several ways:
  - You don’t have to worry about forgetting anything. Constantly remembering and forgetting that which needs to be accomplished can be overwhelming. Having everything in one place takes a lot off of your mind, and allows you to focus.
  - Your projects become easier to tackle once they appear physically, as they become easier for you to break down and prioritize.
  - Chunking large projects into steps makes it less intimidating and more accessible.

- Develop a concrete schedule and plan of action:
  - Develop a schedule based on your lists. Hold yourself to them. Keeping to a schedule assures you don’t get behind and overwhelmed, and also makes projects more accessible.
  - Keep it reasonable, or else a schedule creates more stress. Remember to know your limitations, and that it might help to pad your assignments with a little extra time at first just in case.

Finding your work space/ eliminating distractions:

- Create an environment conducive to success, or find one. Distractions come in many forms, especially in college, and can practically push procrastination on even the most diligent students. The ideal workspace will encourage productivity.
  - Avoid working around or with friends that distract you. Working with others can help, but choose these people wisely.
  - Consider turning off your internet connection and phone unless you absolutely need them. If you’re prone to procrastination, the internet is an informational abyss that can trap you in an endless chain of distractions. And when you do need to do online research, stay on task and make sure you don’t go overboard; research is a procrastinator’s goldmine when they’re avoiding actually writing.
Make your workspace clean of clutter. A mess can create tension and prevent you from putting all your focus on your work.

Be comfortable, but not too comfortable. Being uncomfortable can distract you, but being too comfortable can make you sleepy, especially at night.

Find your ambiance: People are divided on the benefits of listening to music while working. Many ardently claim that it only distracts you, but just as many seem to argue that it helps them focus. Just do what works best for you. Music without lyrics may be a compromise.

Find a study room. In the worst cases, it might be necessary to use a private study room, where there are no distractions and little noise. These might even be helpful when you need to escape your roommate.

Systems of rewards and punishments:

- Rewards are a great way to motivate yourself to complete a distasteful task or activity. Rewards sizes should correlate with task difficulty though; use small rewards for small tasks, and large ones for the hardest tasks. If you can’t think of a good reward, deny yourself a personal pleasure until you finish the work at hand. (Emmett 23)
- Punishments, on the other hand, can work just as well. Tell yourself you can’t attend an event that you were excited about if you don’t finish something on time, etc.
- Keep in mind that these vary in effectiveness from individual to individual, and that one may work better than another.

Inclusion for Accountability and Peer pressure:

- Try talking to your friends about your project, what you plan to do, and when you plan to do it. This creates a sense of accountability, as it pressures you not to disappoint them and to avoid embarrassment. In addition, you may find that they have ideas to offer, or other helpful information and suggestions (Emmett 140).
- Surrounding yourself with other working people as long as everyone is being productive can pressure you into working as well. It creates a serious atmosphere conducive to productivity that you won’t want to interrupt, and pressures you to work as well.
- Group work also forces you to get started on a project, if beginning a project is difficult for you. Group work compels you not to let anybody down and to pull our weight (Nadeau).

Conclusion:

There has been surprisingly little research done on procrastination given its frequency, perhaps because there’s such a cultural stigma against it. Remember though, no matter how stressed you get, you’re not alone. Procrastination is a habit, not a disease, we can break it, we can change. Good luck.
References:


