

The Relationship Between Self-Compassion & Procrastination by Linda Graham

Putting something off can trigger a downward negative spiral. But a recent study suggests that being kind to yourself can help you achieve your goals.

Why do we procrastinate?

Often because we fear failing at the task and dread all the negative self-evaluations that might result from that failure. Unconsciously, feeling okay about one's self becomes more important than achieving the goal.

But the procrastination, of course, triggers other negative feelings about ourselves—recriminations and ruminations for “failing” to take action.

In 20 years of providing psychotherapy, I've witnessed so many times how paralysis in the face of a task or problem can lead to escalating levels of self-criticism and self-depreciation, a self-perpetuating downward negative spiral.

Most procrastination-fighting techniques focus on ways to change a person's behavior: just get started, take action, any kind of action. But a recent study suggests a different approach: being kind to yourself.

Low self-compassion, high stress

Fuschia M. Sirois of Bishop's University in Canada examined whether self-compassion—kindness and understanding toward one's self in response to pain or failure—could be related to procrastination and the stress and suffering that procrastination causes.

The study, recently published in *Self and Identity*, asked more than 750 participants to complete a questionnaire measuring levels of self-compassion and its components: extending kindness toward oneself in response to a mistake rather than judging oneself harshly, recognizing that one shares the struggles with procrastination with many other people rather than feeling isolated or the only one, seeing clearly the big picture about one's predicament rather than over-identifying with negative self-evaluations. The participants also reported their levels of procrastination and stress.

Sirois found that people prone to procrastination had lower levels of self-compassion and higher levels of stress. Further analysis revealed that procrastination might increase levels of stress—particularly among people low in self-compassion.

In fact, her results suggest that self-compassion may play an important role in explaining why procrastination can generate so much stress for people: "Negative self-judgments and feeling isolated by one's procrastinating can be a stressful experience," she writes, "that compromises the well-being of those who chronically procrastinate."

Sirois suggests that interventions that focus on increasing self-compassion may be particularly beneficial for reducing the stress associated with procrastination because self-compassion allows a person to recognize the downsides of procrastination without entangling themselves in negative emotions, negative ruminations, and a negative relationship to themselves. People maintain an inner sense of well-being that allows them to risk failure and take action.

"Self-compassion is an adaptive practice that may...provide a buffer against negative reactions to self-relevant events," writes Sirois. The implication is that by interrupting the loop between negative self-talk and procrastination, self-compassion may help us avoid the stress associated with procrastination, extricate ourselves from that downward spiral, and help us change our behavior for the better.

Interestingly, her study found that students tend to procrastinate more than adults, possibly because they seem less able to regulate their negative emotions and negative self-evaluations.

Sirois' study doesn't prove that a lack of self-compassion directly causes procrastination or that low self-compassion is what causes procrastination to be so stressful. While her study reveals significant links, further research needs to be done on the connections between self-compassion, procrastination, and stress. Sirois' study is actually the first study even to examine the role of self-compassion in the procrastination-stress equation.

In a related study, other researchers found that people who could be more self-forgiving about failures experienced less procrastination later. Sirois argues that because self-compassion is a more global stance towards one's failures than forgiveness for a single act, it may be even more helpful in treating procrastination.

Five steps to self-compassion

“The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.” - Carl Rogers

Sirois’s findings resonate with strategies I’ve tried to offer clients in my psychotherapy practice.

I teach clients to take a self-compassion break any time they seem thrown or derailed by pain or failure, whether caused by their own personal failure or by forces beyond their control. Based on exercises in Kristin Neff’s book *Self-Compassion*, the self-compassion break allows a person to develop the understanding that self-judgment (and avoiding the actions that might trigger self-judgment) is a very human response to very human experiences.

I suggest that clients take a self-compassion break many times a day so that it becomes an automatic positive resource when they first encounter the automatic negative thoughts and states of mind that procrastination can trigger.

Here is how I break down this advice into five steps.

1. Several times a day, stop whatever you’re doing and ask yourself, “What am I experiencing in this moment, right now? Is there any negative self-talk, self-blame, self-shame going on here?”
2. Rather than continuing any negative self-talk or trying to fix things to stop the negative self-talk, simply pause, put your hand on your heart or your cheek, and say to yourself, “Oh, sweetheart!” or “Hey, my good man!” This simple gesture of self-kindness, self-care and concern activates your own caregiving system (rather than the ever-present self-judging system of the inner critic) which begins to relax the grip of the negative and open your mind and heart again to self-acceptance, and then to choices and possibilities.
3. Be kind to yourself if the intention to begin a self-compassion exercise like this triggers more self-judgment and procrastination. You can say to yourself, “May I feel safe in this moment. May I be free of fear, stress, anxiety. May I accept myself just as I am, right here, right now. May I know I can be skillful here.”
4. Then drop into a moment of calm, holding yourself and your experience, whatever it is, with self-awareness and self-acceptance, breathing in a sense of soothing, comfort, and inner peacefulness.
5. Then choose to do something that will help you feel a sense of movement in a good direction. It doesn’t necessarily have to be about the task or project you may be procrastinating about. Re-direct your attention to something pleasant, nourishing, rewarding, meaningful; take a few moments to do express gratitude for some source of goodness in your life before resuming your tasks of the day; talk things over with a good friend or friendly colleague; notice that you are creating more ease and better coping around whatever you choose to do next.