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# MARY O'CONNOR

## Put off procrastinating

"It's a job that's never started that takes the longest to finish." J R R Tolkien.

You have to write a report, put the bins out, do the washing and cook dinner. Yet you are sitting staring into space and trying to come up with a reason to put off doing any of these tasks.

If this sounds like you, then welcome to the procrastinator's club. A place where delay is king and where tomorrow is often the busiest day of the week and the only one in the year which appeals to you.

While others may sing from the hymn sheet "He who hesitates is lost" (or "last" to quote Mae West) or Cervantes' "Delay always breeds danger and to protract a great design is often to ruin it," you are more than happy putting things off until tomorrow or the next day or the day after that.....

"Only Robinson Crusoe had everything done by Friday" you tell yourself as you settle down to stuff yourself with chocolate/watch the horse racing on television/curl up with a good book happily refusing to accept that someday is not a day of the week.

Procrastination occurs in all cultures and is reported as early as 800 BC. Around that time Herodotus, a Greek poet wrote: "Do not put your work off till tomorrow and the day after; for a

depression, etc.). In this instance, you may need additional help to deal with, what is, the cause of the procrastination."

There are a number of procrastination types, according to Mr Warden. There are the thrill seekers who get a buzz from waiting until the last minute; the avoiders who fear failure and can be overly concerned about what people think, preferring others to believe they lack effort/are disorganised rather than lacking ability; and the "decisional" types who will not make a decision to avoid responsibility for the outcome of their actions.

***"Every time you put off something you dislike, you strengthen the habit of not doing something; you practice avoidance instead of participation; and indoctrinate yourself with more fear."***

However, while you may in the short term think you are gaining from putting off tasks, often until the last minute, experts say there is a high price to be paid for this type of behaviour.

Procrastination may result in raised tension and stress levels, a sense of guilt, being self-critical, a preoccupation with the task being deferred to a later time, missed opportunities, social disapproval for not meeting responsibilities or commitments and your full potential not being realised.

Norman Warden says it is important to bear in mind that procrastination is self reinforcing. "Every time you delay it reinforces your negative attitude toward that task (negative reinforcement). Every time you put off something you dislike, you strengthen the habit of not doing something; you practice avoidance instead of participation; and indoctrinate yourself with more fear. Active participation in anything tends to give us a positive attitude toward that activity; inactivity helps acquire an unfavorable attitude."

So how can you overcome this negative behaviour pattern? As an unknown author has said 'Do it today, [because] tomorrow will be today tomorrow'?

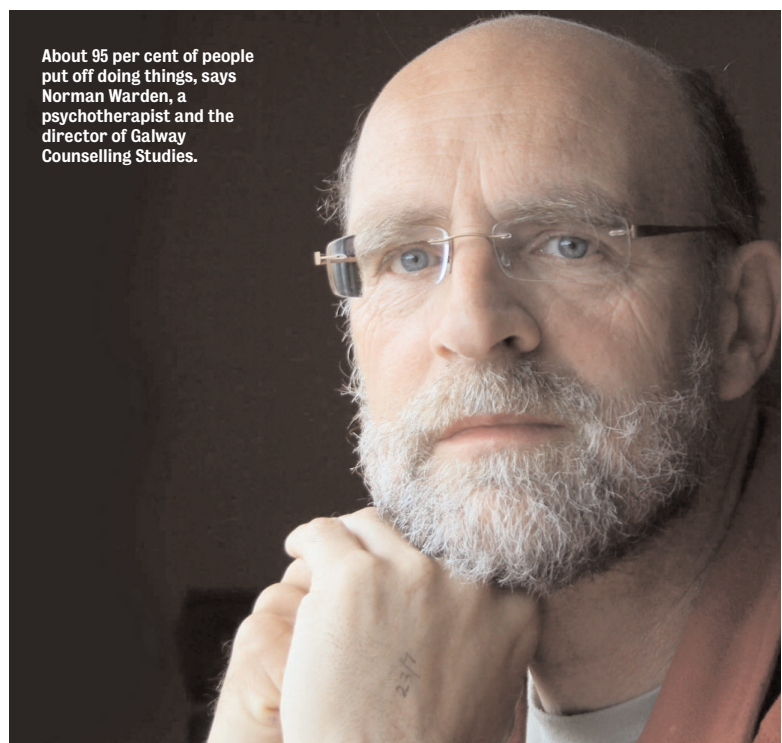
"To overcome procrastination you have to learn to tolerate the short term discomfort for the longer term results and good feelings that come with achievement."

Procrastinators believe they can only do something when they feel up to it, when they are in the right mood. However, motivation and mood tends to come after action. The more you do, the more you'll feel like doing.

"To overcome procrastination you have to learn to tolerate the short term discomfort for the longer term results and good feelings that come with achievement," explains Mr Warden. "Often the negative predictions ('I'll never get it done') regarding the task are dispelled once you get started. When I have some writing to do the initial five to 10 mins are sometimes like 'wading through glue' but before too long I forget the time and even forget to eat and start making progress. The discomfort of putting off the task is replaced by satisfaction and a sense of achievement. Over time this can aid self confidence."

He recommends challenging and changing unhelpful thoughts to helpful ones which support you in getting the task done.

**About 95 per cent of people put off doing things, says Norman Warden, a psychotherapist and the director of Galway Counselling Studies.**



"Swop: 'I'll start work on that paper tomorrow since today's such a beautiful day!' for: 'I said that yesterday, too. I'm just putting off the inevitable, thinking I need to be in the right mood or something. I'll spend two hours working on it today and still have enough time later to reward myself with enjoying the day'."

"Remember it is not too late (there is always time if you start now), it is not hopeless (few situations are truly hopeless), and you are smart enough (or you wouldn't have made it this far)."

Norman Warden offers the following tips to beat procrastination:-

### How to overcome procrastination

\* Set a timer for 15 minutes (we can manage most things for 15 minutes!). Do not underestimate how much you can get done in that time. When the alarm goes off you can set the timer again or have a break.

\* Choose realistic achievable goals. Instead of trying to do the whole project at once, break it down into manageable chunks perhaps starting with the easiest part. Poor goal: "I'm going to stop procrastinating tomorrow!" Excellent goal: "I am setting the timer for 20 minutes to start decluttering my room". Reward yourself when you accomplish your goal.

\* For boring tasks ask yourself: "How can I make this more fun? Perhaps play some lively music: 'Hit the road Jack' by Ray Charles or 'I love to Boogie' by T. Rex.

\* Avoid deflating yourself with "shoulds, oughts, musts or have tos". Pressure like that removes the pleasure of starting.

\* Challenge self-defeating thought patterns such as black and white thinking. Swop: "I can't do it" for "It's going to be really difficult to get going but I can do this".

\* Try doing something that "makes" you do the task you are avoiding. Give yourself a gentle nudge or push, such as arranging a meeting with someone in the knowledge that you must finish a particular report before meeting them. Or invite friends round for tea. That will encourage you to do a big clean-up beforehand.

\* Build in extra support for yourself if the task you are putting off is a difficult one. "I had to make a difficult call involving apologising to someone. I rehearsed with a friend beforehand what I wanted to say. I then chose to make the call on a beautiful day and at a location where I felt most comfortable (Salthill beach)," says Mr Warden. "I cycled there to help reduce the tension in me. The apology involved "biting the bullet" so to speak. So I kept a bullet (not a live one!) on my desktop for a week to get used to the idea and brought it with me to make the call. I also took a few deep breaths beforehand."

\* And as a last resort: arrange with a friend that if you do not complete a specific task by a particular day you will give them €10. There is nothing quite like parting with hard cash to spur you into action.

Norman Warden will run the following courses in Galway in September - Foundation Certificate in Counselling and Psychotherapy, Managing Stress through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and an Introduction to Counselling and Psychotherapy.

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