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Understanding procrastination and how to achieve our goals.
by Timothy A. Pychyl

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What Do Procrastinators Think?

What recent research reveals about procrastination cognitions
Published on September 29, 2011 by Timothy A. Pychyl, Ph.D. in Don't Delay

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What we think about matters. The experience of frequent procrastination-related thoughts contributes to increased psychological distress.

I've been collaborating with a colleague, [Dr. Gordon Flett](#) (York University, Canada Research Chair, and [PT-blogger](#)) on the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*. To say that we've had delay in our work would be an understatement. The irony is not lost on us, or the editor, who has been patiently waiting for the papers to come his way. It's not procrastination, well at least we're not



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Gord has written an excellent paper with his colleagues, Murray Stainton and Clarry Lay (York University), Paul Hewitt (University of British Columbia) and Simon Sherry (Dalhousie University). Their focus is on procrastination-related automatic thoughts.

In previous work, they developed the *Procrastinatory Cognitions Inventory* or PCI for short. This scale captures what case studies of individuals who are troubled by procrastination reveal clearly - **procrastinators commonly report negative automatic thoughts, and they note that their thinking contributes to their needless delay.** In one case study that Flett and colleagues summarize, they note that "Assessment [of the case] revealed thoughts and assumptions related to personal feelings and beliefs about the self as 'defective, incompetent, and pathetic.'" **The client had thoughts like, "I am a total loser."**

Summarizing a number of diverse cases, these authors emphasize how **procrastination and the thoughts related to it are often linked inextricably with feelings of failure, shame, guilt, perfectionism, and self-doubt.**

Automatic thoughts are not uncommon. **Many personal vulnerabilities attributable to personality have related patterns of automatic thoughts.** Moreover, the authors note that incompleteness theories of cognition reveal that **people are especially prone to rumination and obsessional forms of thinking when they don't perform actions that actually move them close to their goals.** With procrastination, this is the rule, not the exception.

The Procrastinatory Cognitions Inventory (PCI) has items that capture these negative thought patterns. If you were completing this short questionnaire, you would indicate how frequently you think things like: **"I should be more responsible," and "Why didn't I start earlier?" and "I can turn it in late. I'm behind in my studies this time, but next time will**

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In previous research, scores on the PCI have been shown to be associated with measures of behavioral procrastination, impulsivity, loneliness, and depression, as well as high levels of anxiety, low levels of Conscientiousness, and higher levels of distress. Interestingly, people who scored high on this measure, also reported excessive use of the Internet as a form of distraction.

In their most recent studies involving both undergraduate- and graduate-student samples, they found that scores on the PCI were associated with negative automatic thoughts about the self in general, as well as automatic thoughts that reflect the need to be perfect. As the authors emphasize, ". . . it is also important to not lose sight of the fact that procrastination and perfectionism are often found in troubled procrastinators" . . . adding that in terms of our thinking ". . . they share some factors, including fear of failure and distress."

That said, it is important to note that **perfectionism and procrastination, while similar, are still distinguishable**, and the data from the present studies did provide evidence of how they differed. For example, perfectionism has been shown to be linked with both mastery avoidance and performance avoidance motivation orientations, whereas procrastination was only associated with performance avoidance. Flett and colleagues explain it this way,

"perfectionists who experience thoughts about their need to be perfect are engaged motivationally in order to avoid deteriorations of competence or avoid missing opportunities for learning and self-development. However, the predominant orientation of procrastinators with frequent thoughts about their dilatory ways is that they are defensively engaged and are motivated primarily in order to avoid demonstrations of low ability. Not surprisingly, this maladaptive orientation tends to predict multiple negative emotions in performance situations and diminished performance."

There were interesting differences between the undergrad- and grad-student samples due, at least in part, to the different measures used in each study. Among undergrads, high scores on PCI were related to performance avoidance goals. Not surprisingly, procrastinatory cognitions were linked to avoiding failure, not approaching success.

In the grad-student sample, Flett and his colleagues found that those **students who reported more frequent procrastinatory cognitions also reported more apprehension about writing, higher stress, lower self-actualization, as well as feelings of being an imposter**. Ouch. This is an awful place for a graduate student to live, yet I know from some of my own earlier research involving a doctoral-student sample that far too many students experience this personal distress and self-doubt.

Implications and Concluding thoughts

For readers who know these procrastinatory thoughts all too well, these research results will not be surprising. The surprising thing from a research and clinical perspective is that far too little attention has been given to procrastination-related cognitions in clinical assessment and intervention. One of the implications of this research is that **helping people to reduce or eliminate thoughts about procrastination will facilitate changes in both behavior and well-being**. Of course, as Dr. Flett, an expert in perfectionism, adds as a closing sentence, ". . . some clear challenges are likely ahead, given that those who experience procrastinatory cognitions also tend to have perfectionistic thoughts and very negative views of the self."

Each of us can take something away from this research. First, we're not alone, and, second, we're not "crazy" when we have the thoughts we do about needless task delay. That said, these thought patterns are certainly "not helpful," and it will be beneficial to seek help with strategies to reduce these automatic patterns of thought that undermine our goal pursuit and well-being.

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I'll give the final words to the authors, who write: "*Clearly, an emphasis on negative self-evaluation is central to an understanding of cognitions about procrastination, and ruminating about their dilatory ways is perhaps one way that distress prone individuals make inferences about their personal failures and inadequacies.*"

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