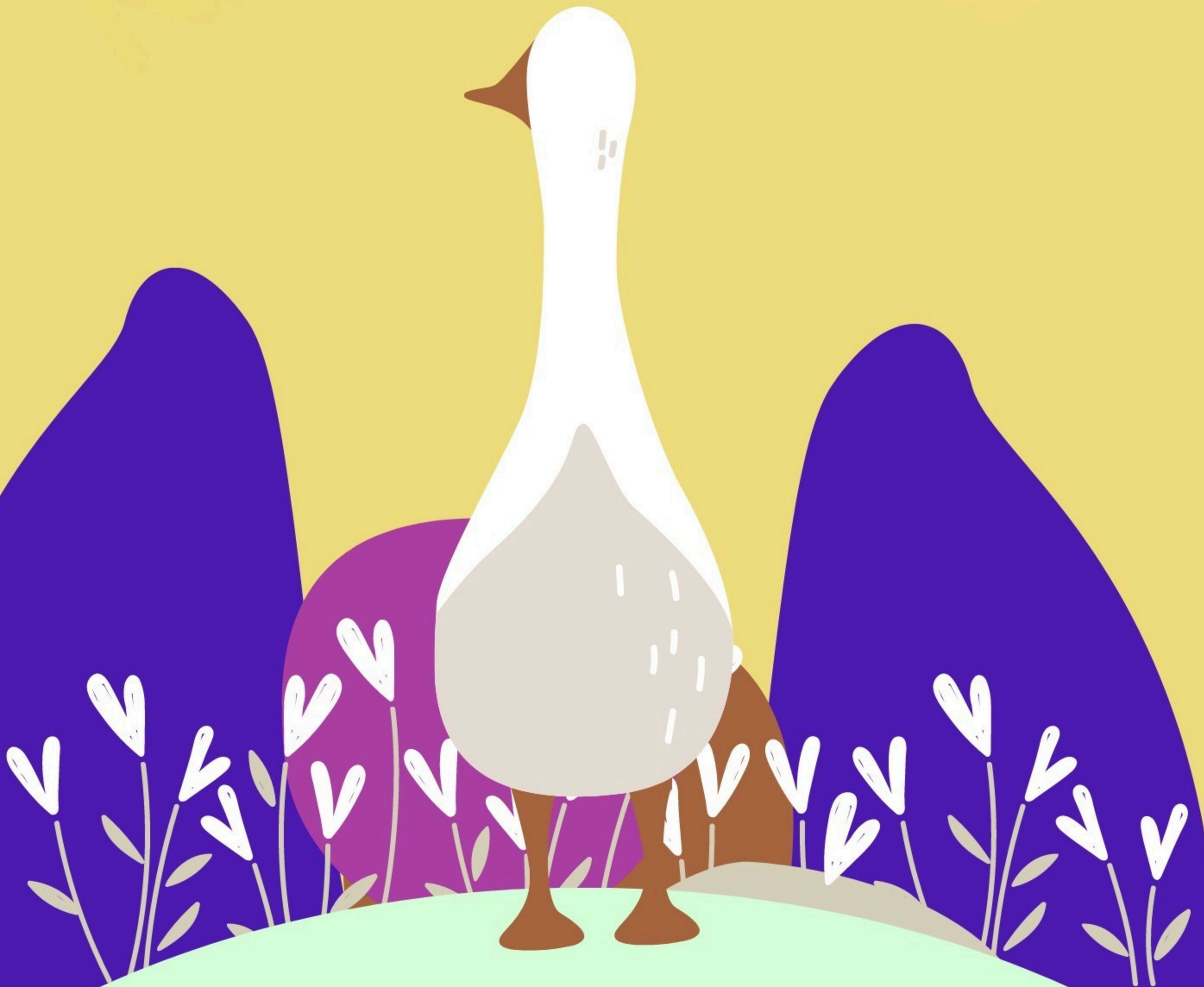


How to Help Your Child Stop **Procrastinating**



**AND START GETTING
THINGS DONE**

From Procrastination to Flow

NOTE FROM SOFIA

Over the years, I have worked with over 100 students on various aspects of the college application process. As students move through these stages, they begin to better understand their strengths and accomplishments, articulate challenges and identify their interests and possible majors. The vast majority of students complete their applications with more ease and inspiration than they thought possible when they started.

But invariably, I encounter students who delay, resist, or avoid their to-do list. Some of my favorite students, indeed, are chronic procrastinators. I recognize their struggles because I have been there. Over time, I became fascinated with why and how we procrastinate and how I can help students move forward.

This is how I came to develop and test a highly effective approach that takes into account the fact that procrastination is normal and near-universal and a trait we need to understand why it strikes and what to do about it.

Sofia Blake

Education Coach | Studio SB



From Procrastination to Flow

Introduction

Dear Parents,

I don't need to tell you this - we are all guilty of procrastinating on certain tasks some of the time. Highly productive and constantly procrastinating parents are equally unable to understand why their child or children put off tasks they should and could do earlier or on time.

Let's start with the stats:

As many as **75% of students consider themselves procrastinators**, with 50% doing so regularly and to a level that is considered problematic. More than 20% of people may be **chronic procrastinators**. Joseph Ferrari, author of "Still Procrastinating?: The No Regrets Guide to Getting It Done," says that this number is higher than those suffering from depression, phobia, panic attacks, and alcoholism. While these are considered legitimate, procrastination is usually ignored and trivialized.

The perplexing thing about procrastination is that indulging procrastination generally doesn't make us happy. When students procrastinate, they may **feel guilt, shame, anxiety, and depression**. In research settings, people who procrastinate have higher levels of stress and lower well-being.

Why do we avoid tasks even when we know they are good for us? What is blocking our students from starting and completing assignments on time or at all? Is there something different about today's environment that makes "wasting time" easier and staying productive harder? What is procrastination and how can we learn to overcome it and turn it into a tool for good? What is its cost to students, and how can parents help their children build better habits, self-esteem, and desire to succeed?

This is what we are going to consider in the pages that follow.

From Procrastination to Flow

Decoding Procrastination

Let us start with the basics. Nobody goes around and says, I am a procrastinator.

In fact, if you were to point-blank accuse your child of procrastination, they would most likely deny it. They - and we - will have **excuses, stories, and reasons** for why they are not doing whatever you think they are supposed to be doing.

Before we, parents and educators, attempt to understand and help our children and students, let's remember:

Point 1: It is not important what words we use for procrastination - avoidance, delay, denial, resistance, "I'll do it later," and "It's not the right time." **Our goal shouldn't be to name names but achieve transformation.**

Point 2: Procrastination is not about doing nothing. It really is doing something instead of what you should be doing. **Busy doesn't mean productive.** In fact, you can be very busy and still procrastinate. It is not difficult to create the impression of being busy to avoid doing something that may be more important or necessary.

Point 3: Procrastination comes in many different shapes and forms, which is why it can be difficult to address. Procrastination speaks many languages, which means that we can hack it in many different ways. The trick is to know when you are procrastinating and when you are **delaying purposefully.**

Point 4: The opposite of procrastination is motivation. Extrinsic motivation involves behaving a certain way to avoid punishment or receive a reward. That is OK but may not be sustainable. When we engage in an activity because it is rewarding to us, work feels effortless. This is what we call **intrinsic motivation** and a state of flow. That is the goal.

Point 5: The way we procrastinate and get motivated is **highly personal** though common roots exist. That means that tapping into a productive flow is a matter of choice, not skills, resources, or opportunities. **You can switch to productivity anytime.**

Let's see how to switch from procrastination to motivation.

From Procrastination to Flow

Decoding Procrastination

Food for thought:

In the space below, journal on the following questions.

- 1. What is the one thing your kid avoids doing the most?*
- 2. What is your kid doing instead of doing ...that other thing?*
- 3. What is usually the reason you hear why things didn't get done or got done last minute?*
- 4. What is your greatest fear about your child procrastinating?*
- 5. Do you wish your child was doing some of the things you wish you were doing or you wish you had done in the past?*
- 6. Do you compare your child to someone else's child? Is this helping you be a better parent? When is it and when it is not helping you or your child?*

From Procrastination to Flow

Decoding Procrastination

Typical Procrastinators:

When working with students, we look at some known types of task-avoidance. When students identify their own habits and behaviors - and have someone hear them without judgments or expectations - they become willing to do something about trying to change.

Students and I play the game "Who can identify the most Ps." This is usually an exciting and insightful exercise which makes it easy for everyone involved to let their guard down and identify behaviors, stories, and patterns.

See if you can understand what each of these types comes with and whether you can identify some aspects of these types in your child. Your goal is to understand, not do anything about it at this point.

- Perfectionist
- Precocious learner
- Better late than wrong
- Indecisive
- The rebel
- Thrill Seeker
- High Performer-High Achiever
- Possible Learning Difficulties
- Hypersensitive
- Categorical
- Critical/ Self-critical

Is Your Kid a (Chronic) Procrastinator?

Consider the questions on the next page. Answer with yes or no, or indicate the degree of your response by putting a number from 1-4, where

- 1 - "My child rarely does this"
- 2 - "My child sometimes does this"
- 3 - "My child often does this"
- 4 - "My child always/ or almost always does this"



The P-List

Is your child procrastinating?

One of the challenges in doing anything about our procrastination habits is recognizing we have them. So instead of "calling names" let's see if you can recognize certain traits, behaviors, and other ways, your child may be ... procrastinating.

Pick your "p-signs" from the list below. Next to it, write down a number from 1-4:
1- Rarely; 2 - Sometimes; 3 - Often; 4) Always/ almost always

Does your child...

often feels overwhelmed	say they don't know where to start or what needs to be done	say the task is too hard, or too easy, makes no sense, it's stupid
ask for extensions	say they don't know how to do "this"	say it's not the right time to do "this"
believe (they were told) that as kids they were faster, smarter, advanced for their age	tell you they work best under pressure	once working, gets easily distracted, so they start something else
miss deadlines, submit late	have reasons, explanations, stories about why they are not doing "this"	say they want to get it just right, perfect
expect to be praised / scolded for the results	find it hard to concentrate	think it's better to do "this" when they have "more time"
feel guilty or failing you, friends, teachers	believe others do "this" better, know more	plans to start, but all of a sudden they feel tired and say it's better do do this tomorrow
deny they have a procrastination problem	spend too much time on SM	say they will do a better job if they start tomorrow

From Procrastination to Flow

RECONSIDER THE PROBLEM

Now that you have begun to identify some underlying reasons why your child may be putting tasks off, and now that you are beginning to see more clearly how and when they are procrastinating, **let's reconsider our own assumptions about the issue.**

...Let's agree on what procrastination is NOT.

1. It is not laziness
2. It is not a lack of intelligence
3. It is not a lack of skills
4. It is not a lack of discipline
5. It is not a lack of caring
6. It is not a character flaw
7. It is not a bad attitude
8. It is not a lack of time-management skills
9. It is not wasting time
10. It is not a question of tools, tips, hacks, and apps
11. It is not all social media's fault

Would you agree with these statements?

Write down your response and statement:

I agree that my child procrastinates not because _____

Not even because _____. I may have been wrong assuming it
is because _____ but I am willing to investigate this further.

From Procrastination to Flow

WHAT IS PROCRASTINATION?

It's a feeling thing!

Rather than a problem of productivity or time management, **procrastination is about how we cope with challenging emotions and negative moods**. Economist George Ainslie calls it a basic instinct.

It's a tactic to avoid discomfort and deeper underlying emotions. It is a form of escapism and a "giving in to feel good."

When we are faced with a difficult task, most of us experience a bad feeling, often anxiety or distress. To feel better, we put off the task which makes us feel better. Researchers confirm this behavior as a **submission to an impulse to feel good**.

The more we procrastinate, the more we tend to continue doing it. Learning specialists talk about **a reinforced habit** since procrastinating is rewarding as it decreases anxiety.

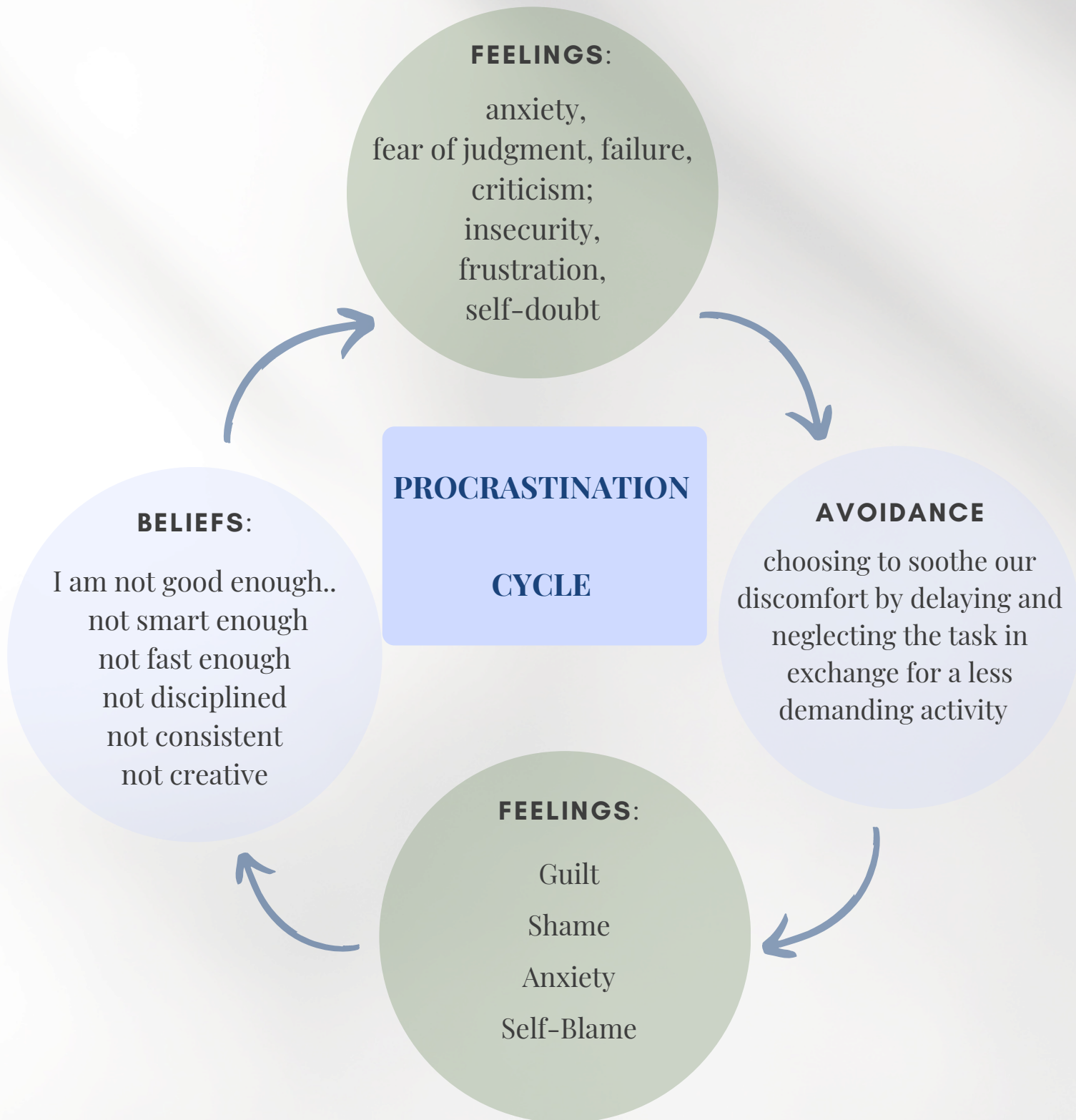
Procrastination is a perfect example of present bias, our **hard-wired tendency to prioritize short-term needs ahead of long-term ones**.

The cost for our immediate "feel good," however, is long-term well-being, success, and a sustained decrease in anxiety. After we delay, we usually scramble and usually do a shabby job.

To make matters more complicated, some last-minute jobs are not that shabby, which is a classic reward for the procrastinator. Research shows that such last-minute good jobs are indeed very memorable and therefore harder to reframe. **This is how procrastinating becomes a vicious cycle**.

The initial resistance and discomfort only grow as we delay action, which makes it harder for us to start. Not only does this avoidance hurt our productivity and time management, but it has a measurable impact on our psychological state.

A vicious cycle



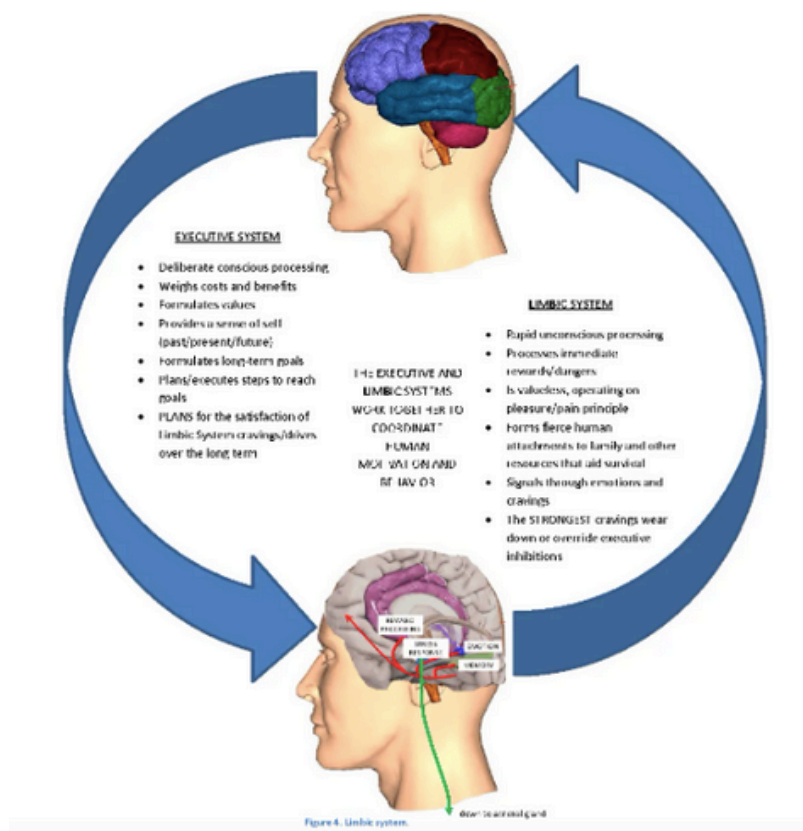
Consider these questions:

- *Do you agree with the basic notion of procrastination as self-regulation failure?*
- *Do you agree that it can lead to chronic stress, depression, anxiety, and poor health?*

From Procrastination to Flow

IT'S THE BRAIN...

Instead of blaming our kids, teachers, or ourselves, it's helpful to understand the **brain science** behind why we procrastinate. It is our kids' **normal response** and can be understood as “the priority of short-term mood repair over the longer-term pursuit of intended actions.



We are actually wired for procrastination. When facing an unpleasant activity, two parts of the brain get activated - **the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex**. The limbic system is the first responder, which concerns itself with safety and immediate pleasures. It is the short-term pleasure center of our brain. It is part that tells you to pull your hand away from the hot burner or run fast if you see a tiger coming your way. (I am not sure why psychologists still use the tiger example. Tigers must have been a real existential threat a while back.)

From Procrastination to Flow

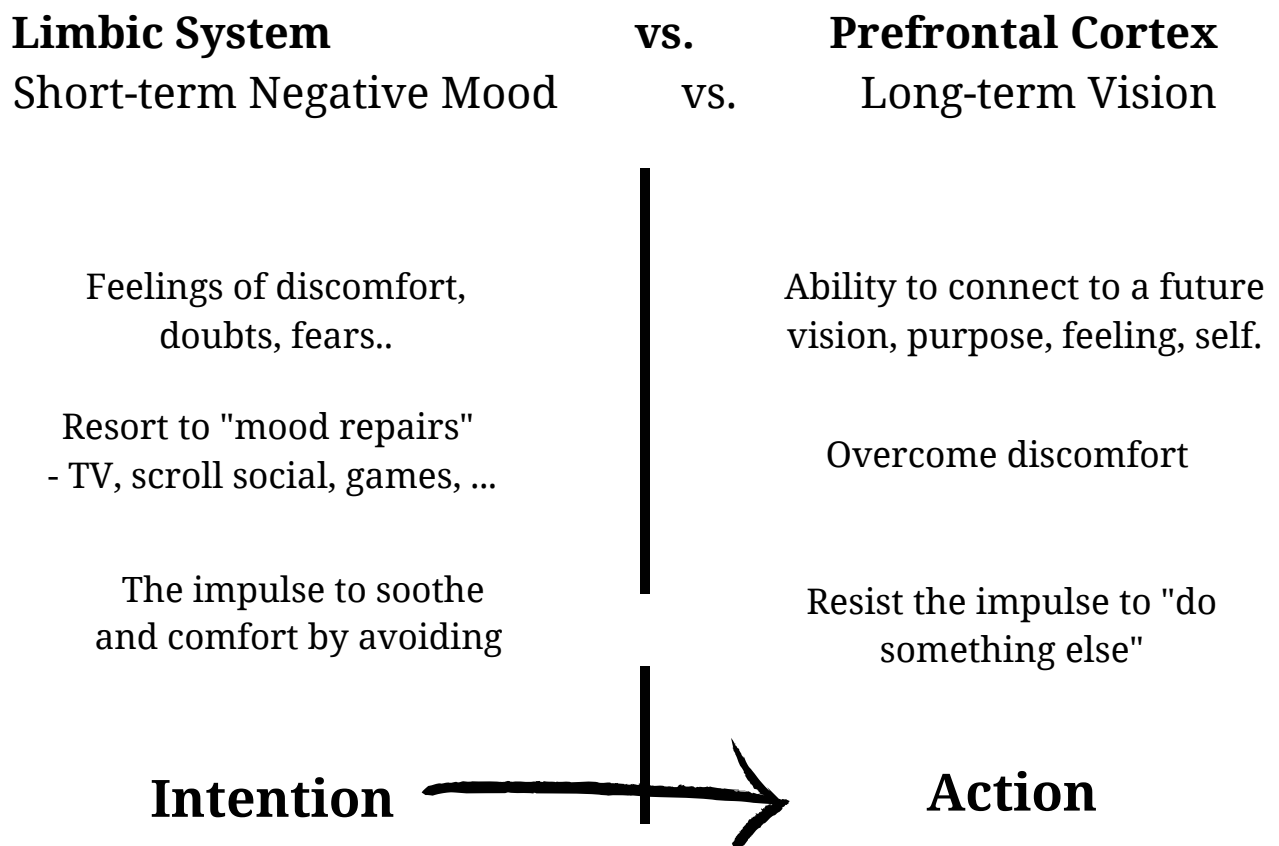
IT'S A BRAIN WAR...

The limbic system is pitted against the prefrontal cortex, the longer-term, planning-oriented part of our brain. It is the “more mature” part that makes us different from animals. It allows us to analyze and integrate information and think before we act.

The limbic system often wins. It is always on automatic.

Since the prefrontal cortex is a newer and, therefore, the weaker part of our brain to get things done, **we really need to consciously kick our "wiser" parts of the brain into gear.**

Brain Wars



From Procrastination to Flow

How to Hack Procrastination?

The only way to beat procrastination is to trick the mind. When students decide to work on overcoming avoidance and delaying, we walk through a process - creatively, consistently, with love and patience. It works. **Try it in your own way.**

Let's call them the Five Es.

- 1. Educate** understand and normalize and child's tendency to delay;
- 2. Engage** be continuously curious about what's blocking them from taking action; ask open-ended questions;
- 3. Eliminate** decide to hack your P;
commit to tricking your brain;
- 4. Expect** anticipate your P's comeback;
prepare to fight distractions
- 5. Empower** learn how to make better decisions
anytime, anywhere; you are the boss.

From Procrastination to Flow

E1: Educate

Understand, normalize and own your P.

Understanding the science behind procrastination is part of accepting that it is not your fault or that of your child. That also means that there are ways to solve it.

Exercises and practices:

1. Say out loud something along the lines: Robin (name of your child) is not lazy, stupid, undisciplined. He/She cares and wants to do well.
2. Review the science and difference between the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex. Remember that procrastination is a **coping mechanism and a normal response** to dealing with emotional difficulties.
3. Go back to Typical Procrastinators and see if you can **identify some possible reasons** why your child procrastinates. (perfectionist, afraid of being wrong, high achiever, precocious, rebel, used to be right, etc.)
4. **Talk** to your child and ask him/ her to name the feelings they have. I teach students the language of procrastination so they are able to understand what is happening and why. Instead of avoiding a task, they are able to name their fears and discomfort. Naming them disarms them.
5. Practice **self-forgiveness and compassion**.

In a 2010 study, researchers found that students who were able to forgive themselves for procrastinating when studying for a first exam ended up procrastinating less when studying for their next exam. Another later study found a high correlation between low compassion, high stress, and chronic procrastination. So the more you can forgive and offer compassion - towards your child and yourself - the better you support motivation.

From Procrastination to Flow

E2: Engage

Be curious and have conversations

We often underestimate the power of conversation in solving problems.

Depending on the age of your student at home, your relationship, your own style of parenting, and personal circumstances, try to find ways to talk about your own experience with avoiding tasks and be curious about what's going on with your kid's task-avoidance.

Exercises and practices:

1. *When your kid is procrastinating on a task, acknowledge how difficult it must be and how you trust they will be able to do whatever is necessary.*

2. *Ask questions to understand what is going through their minds. Make sure your attitude is that of curiosity and compassion and not of criticism and disappointment. You are not yet offering solutions.*

See the next page for examples of questions around which you can have a conversation or more. Watch the tone of your voice. Make sure you enter these conversations with the right frame of mind and that you are genuine and loving.

3. *Acknowledge that we avoid difficult and important tasks most often because we are afraid of being judged, criticized, or embarrassed. We compare ourselves to others, and we do not want to disappoint. Share your own discomfort with these feelings. Normalize discomfort.*

4. *Help them see the big picture. What will happen if you leave everything for tomorrow? Do you think you will have time to do all of this next week? Would it be better if you started some of today? How about doing a draft now? Or try it for 30 min and see what happens?*

Example Questions and Ideas for Discussion

1. What is the hardest thing about ... starting that paper, finishing your homework, catching up on...spending more time doing...?
2. What would you like to accomplish? (Ask clarifying questions that make the task specific.) What would you like to accomplish today, for example?
3. What do you think could help you start/continue/finish X?
4. What worries you the most now?
5. Why do you think you don't want to do it right now?
6. What's the first thing you need to do if you want to work on this job?
(Example: Get out your notebook, open the computer file, look up...)
7. What can make X more interesting? Easier?
8. What standards have you set for yourself? Is it possible that you expect too much of yourself? Too little?
9. What do you think are my/our expectations?
10. Based on past experience, what usually happens when you tell yourself you'll do a job later? *(Make sure there's no judgment filtering in your tone of voice or manner of asking. This is a fact-finding question.)*
11. If you put this off now, when do you think you'll end up doing it? Be honest.
12. What do you think you are sacrificing if you don't do X?
13. What do you think you will gain by doing it now? How do you think you will feel?
14. Why don't you do that right now and see how it goes from there?
15. Is there anything I can do to help?



From Procrastination to Flow

E3: Eliminate

Fight it and trick it

The only way to beat procrastination is to trick your brain!

In the workshop for students, I go through **more than 50 straightforward and fun tips, tricks, and hacks** to beat avoidance. Students have a chance to practice these tips and share examples, feedback, and experiences. There is never a situation where a student runs out of options for "next action."

In this workbook, let's review a few **GROUPS OF HACKS**.

THE "LOW BAR" group of hacks

I have discovered that when I lower the bar for my students, they produce better work. It relieves them of the pressure to impress, to score big, to produce "amazing" work. So allow your kid the luxury to do that.

Exercises and practice:

- *Tell your kid that you don't expect perfect work from them. Find your own language. Some of my students say they will "produce garbage," while others use stronger language. Use your kid's language and see how that may help them do great work.*
- *Tell them that they may experience "tiny bursts" of motivation. Encourage them to capture them however they can - record ideas on their phone, write on a piece of paper, or have a special place where they "do work when they are not doing work."*
- *Tell them it's OK to work in "non-ideal" places. Many students do better work not at their desks, in the classroom, or at home. They do it in the car, between practices, on the coach. The "non-working" places are often less intimidating and conducive to productivity.*

From Procrastination to Flow

E3: Eliminate

Fight it and trick it

THE "REWARDS" group of hacks

Our brain operates on a reward-based system.

To break the procrastination loop, see if you can help your child find something more rewarding than the immediate gratification of task-avoidance. To plow through periods of boredom and discomfort, we need to regularly reward our accomplishments.

Help your child come up with a "**bigger, better offer**" than feeling good right now. This is highly individual and specific.

Exercises and practice:

- *Reward progress, not the final goal.*
- *Imagine rewards more broadly. Think of rewards as:*
 - *an internal "high-five."*
 - *something that reinforces what you've done rather than negates it.*
 - *an experience (I will watch X on Netflix guilt-free, share with a friend)*
 - *a place (I will go to YMCA, a favorite spot)*
 - *a feeling (I will be proud of myself, I will feel less overwhelm)*
 - *a material thing (I will get a Starbucks, Chipotle)*
- *Couple work with fun. Can you attach some fun to a task you avoid?*
 - *study in a favorite place or at a time when you are most productive;*
 - *work with friends;*
 - *listen to music, pace, hum..., if appropriate :)*

From Procrastination to Flow

E3: Eliminate

Fight it and trick it

THE CHUNKING AND SEQUENCING group of hacks

There are scores of tricks related to how we break down and visualize tasks.

Exercises and practice

Consider helping your kid by asking them to try one or more of these:

- *Imagine something, anything, that they got through till the end - a hike, a sports game, a tedious dinner with a least favorite uncle, a book they didn't quite enjoy. Now think of the task at hand and imagine it done;*
- *Even if they don't believe it, ask them to think/ say to themselves that you can do it, somehow, even if they are not sure how. Ask them to picture many people before you and many after you in the same spot as you. Tell them they are not alone;*
- *Imagine or write down some of the steps needed to get there. The list need not be comprehensive;*
- *Decide to procrastinate. As they make a list of some of the things they need to do, ask them to decide which they are NOT going to do;*
- *Create mini-goals and immediately decide on doing one in the next 5 minutes;*
- *Choose the easiest mini-goal, or hardest; or most important, or least important; whatever THEY feel like it;*
- *Choose just one thing; commit to focus; resist overwhelm.*
- *Choose a favorite song, object, word, or thing to help them power through*

From Procrastination to Flow

E3: Eliminate

Fight it and trick it

TIME- MACHINE group of hacks

The possibilities to trick our brains about "time" - then, now, before, after, long, brief - are close to infinite. The concept of time is one of the most interesting, one that offers great opportunities to rewire for better habits. When working with students, we explore a menu of tools that students can practice and adapt to their particular needs and learning styles. Here is a sample.

Exercises and practice

- Set **earlier deadlines**. This is similar to some people (me!) setting their watch 10 min fast to trick the brain. I know the watch is fast, but I am forcing my brain to see a different time;
- Attach **deadlines to small tasks**. By the end of the day/ week, I will come up with a title/ outline/practice 10 problems from the X section of the Y sample test;
- Instead of saying, I will work until I finish X, say I will work for Y minutes;
- Try the **1-thing rule** (you can say to yourself that you'd do "Just 1 problem/ write 1 sentence/ page.);
- Apply the **2-min rule**. (you can guess what it is);
- Do a **Power Hour**. You can start with a Power 20-minutes. Leave aside all distractions and commit to power work, whatever that means for you now;
- **5-min Miracle** - What action can you take that takes less than 5-min and moves the needle forward;
- Next time try 10-min, or 30 min, or an hour;
- **Start today**;
- Take **immediate action**.

From Procrastination to Flow

E4: Expect

Anticipate procrastination to strike back

When we manage to overcome procrastination and get going on a task, we feel fantastic. The trouble is that the procrastination monsters will try to come back, again and again, usually when we are most tired and, therefore, off guard.

One of the most successful tactics I teach students is to **anticipate procrastination's comeback**. I tell them to be ready for it sneaking up to them skillfully masked.

When that happens, students may say:

- I am tired. I can do it tomorrow.
- It's too late now.
- This is very difficult.
- I can never get it right.
- The problem is not clear. The teacher didn't explain it. (that may be right:)
- It's not the right time.
- It's boring.
- It's stupid.
- I need to do X first.

You get the point...

Exercises and Practice:

- *Encourage your child to tell you what they expect to say or do when a task becomes difficult. If necessary, help them identify procrastination's lies by telling them what you do and say when you avoid an unpleasant task. (paying a bill, going to the gym, running an errand).*
- *Encourage your kid to tell you what they plan to do in response.*

(Hint: more tricks and hacks.)

- *Find a way - explicitly or implicitly - to give them permission to give in. Know in your heart of hearts that there is always another time and a different decision.*

From Procrastination to Flow

E5: Empower

Building kids' agency muscle

The difference between procrastination and motivation is one decision. The only way for students to beat procrastination is by strengthening their "agency" muscles. Our job as parents and educators is, therefore, to help our children and students become **confident decision-makers**.

Encouraging our kids to reflect, decide and take responsibility for their actions (or lack of) and their consequences is one of the best parenting we can do.

Procrastination is all about making decisions. Every activity comes at the expense of another activity, which is why some psychologists claim that we humans procrastinate all the time by choosing one action over another.

Giving our kids autonomy and the freedom to make decisions is one of the best ways to nurture our kids' motivation to explore, learn, grow and prosper.

When our kids suffer from low self-esteem and self-doubt, the result is procrastination. Research shows that when parents support their kids' autonomy, that leads kids to develop better planning and time-management skills and higher levels of motivation.

The same is true when we need to help kids break the temptation to avoidance. When faced with an infinite number of potential substitute actions, kids need to decide what their "reward" would be for making a better choice. That reward (or the absence of) is based on specific and very personal circumstances.

That is why the path to **motivation is internal** and not dependent on threats or incentives from the outside. As parents, we need to practice empowering language and parenting that build confidence and resilience.

From Procrastination to Flow

E5: Empower

Building a sense of agency

Exercises and practice:

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I know what makes my child tick? Or what antagonizes them?*
- Am I more inspiring or controlling? How can I be more of the first and less of the second?*
- Do I have anxieties and needs that push or block certain behaviors?*
- Do I give my child enough headspace to think for themselves?*
- Do I know my priorities and values? These change, so do I revisit them regularly?*
- Are my priorities and values clear to my child, including the consequences of certain actions?*
- Have I let my child face the consequences of their actions?*

Practice:

- Make a list of the questions or phrases you usually use when you suspect your child is delaying or avoiding action. Look at your list and see if you could rephrase your statements and questions. For example: "Did you do ...this?" can be "Were you able to find the time you needed to focus on ...this?" or "Can I help you find the time ..."*

From Procrastination to Flow

A word about social media and the question of agency

Social media clashes with our ability to think independently and focus. Various platforms on our **kids' phones steal precious time and energy** that can be otherwise spent more productively.

There is much research, discussion forums, and *online* resources to guide parents in helping kids manage social media. Good luck!

Social media often exacerbates the procrastination challenge, especially among students who are already struggling with focus and self-esteem.

Social media cannot be blamed for our kids' procrastination.

At its core, the problem of social media overuse and procrastination is the same.

Resisting digital distractions also **require tricking our brain**. It's still easier to change our circumstances than ourselves, said Gretchen Rubin, author of "Better Than Before: What I Learned About Making and Breaking Habits."

Here are a few examples of what students and I have tried:

- *Change your password to an app to make it harder to get to impulsively.*
- *Put your phone away for X minutes.*
- *Play "Airplane" (pretend there is no wi-fi, put your phone on airplane mode.)*

From Procrastination to Flow

Final Word

The first step toward eliminating procrastination is to **recognize it and begin to build awareness around it**. Remind yourself and your kid that procrastination is a **way we manage stress**. It has nothing to do with talent, skills, time-management skills, intelligence, discipline, hard work, attitude, personality, etc.

Practice and encourage kids to be **compassionate and kind** with themselves (and others) when they don't do what they had set out for themselves. Self-blame can lead to emotional disengagement and deteriorating health. Removing bitterness, criticism, and accusations helps us all focus on the roots and solutions of procrastination.

Engage in conversations with your kid - and encourage them to have conversations with themselves or journal - about why they procrastinate. Remind them that usually, we do it **because we are**:

- **afraid** of failure, criticism, embarrassment, disappointments.
- **frustrated** about not knowing what to do, how, or when.
- **expecting** perfect, easy, and quick results.

Begin building steel confidence in beating procrastination. Commit to giving it a shot. Not one. Many shots. As many as it takes. And know that the outcome doesn't have to be "perfect" all the time.

Remember, **motivation follows action**. Let's repeat: motivation follows action.

Learn and practice tools to highjack procrastination. Opening the door to mindfulness practices is another way to trick your brain into adopting better habits. Research shows that eight weeks of mindfulness meditation reduces the volume of the limbic system, the home of procrastination.

From Procrastination to Flow

Final Word cont.

Lastly, don't give up, and don't let your kid give up.

Not all tricks will work all the time.

Keep practicing the strategies that work most effectively for you, and encourage your kid to do the same. Reward your kid with their currency when they achieve difficult goals.

And when they lapse or "fail," don't get disheartened. Pat them on the shoulder for trying and tell them they can try again and again.

We should all practice what we teach. If and when you fail to get something done on time or you resist pursuing something you want or you've committed to, share your experiences and lessons with your kid, and model compassion and grit.

Are you ready?

The End