



# IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

June 2005  
Issue No. 58

## PROCRASTINATION – THE THIEF OF TIME

*Why am I always late? How do I manage to con myself every time into thinking I'll have more time (energy, enthusiasm) tomorrow? Why do I always wait until the last minute? Why can't I plan ahead?*

Procrastination is a ubiquitous human problem. Almost all of us can cite one or more occasions when our delay in performing an important task caused inconvenience or even harm to ourselves or someone else. Those less seriously afflicted learn from the experience and modify their behavior to avoid the painful consequences of procrastination. Others, despite earnest intentions to change, repeatedly suffer frustration, regret, or shame from the consequences of missed flights, deadlines, and opportunities. Despite vows made in the clear light of hindsight to do it differently next time, determination wanes and history inevitably repeats itself.

Even regular procrastinators actually do most things well and tend to procrastinate only in certain areas of functioning (e.g., paying bills, preparing an assigned task, cleaning out the garage). Certain tasks or events can trigger anxiety, fear, or even paralysis that escalates as a deadline approaches or a neglected problem worsens. For lawyers, procrastination can damage a career. Missing filing deadlines, failing to timely communicate with clients, or putting off attention to billing or the IOLTA account can lead to disgruntled clients, malpractice claims, and bar disciplinary actions. Because of the intense discomfort that often accompanies procrastination, certain defenses

emerge to help anesthetize the individual's distress and make delay seem like a reasonable strategy. Such distorted thinking may take the form of rationalizations such as: "I don't have time." "It's too hard/overwhelming." "I'll never do it well enough." "I'll get to it one of these days."

The good news for sufferers of procrastination is this: Although the proclivity may be partly inherited (e.g., associated with circadian rhythms and/or levels of brain chemicals), procrastination is not genetically etched in stone. It is largely a learned behavior and can therefore be *un*-learned. In her book, *It's About Time*, Dr. Linda Sapadin describes six distinct patterns of self-deception, avoidance, and unrealistic thinking on which the procrastination habit depends. Although one pattern usually dominates, most procrastinators will recognize in themselves aspects of one or more patterns. Dr. Sapadin identifies them as the perfectionist, the crisis-maker, the dreamer, the defier, the worrier, and the overdoer. Each pattern usually emerges from deeply imbedded thoughts and beliefs about oneself and one's competence, authority, success or failure, personal responsibility, the nature of reality, and so on. Each of these patterns of thought leads to characteristic behaviors and calls for certain strategies for change.

Change *is* possible. New behaviors, although difficult to establish at first, can over time become as automatic as the old self-defeating ones – with commitment, appropriate supports, consistent practice, and adequate rewards. A helpful place to start in this endeavor is simply to educate yourself about the issue. A procrastinator may quip, "That's a subject I already know too much about." Alas, *not* enough.

### OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

503-226-1057  
1-800-321-OAAP  
www.oaap.org

#### *Lawyers Helping Lawyers*

- Alcohol & Chemical Dependency
- Career Change & Transition
- Gambling Addiction
- Mental Health
- Procrastination & Time Management

*A free, nonprofit,  
confidential program  
for you.*

Dr. William Knaus's book, *Do It Now*, sheds light on self-deceptions that offer short-term comfort but result in ultimate defeat. An examination of distorted thinking based on false beliefs empowers the procrastinator to begin to recognize and exercise choice over delay tactics. Books such as these can boost optimism and offer immediate impetus to the process of developing new behavior patterns.

Education alone may not be enough. It is useful to identify how your beliefs and behaviors evolved in the first place. Both our unconscious, automatic assumptions and our habitual behavior patterns are likely to have their roots in early experiences with parents, teachers, and so on. On our own, however, we are likely to procrastinate in this self-discovery process itself. With the help of someone else, perhaps a counselor or supportive friend or family member, we are more likely to follow through in recognizing patterns, substituting more accurate beliefs, developing realistic goals and strategies, making course corrections based on observation and feedback, and staying on task. When it comes to implementing techniques for change, a procrastinator may also benefit from the services of a personal coach, who will generally emphasize action over insight.

Overcoming procrastination can be an enlightening journey of self-discovery. The rewards for making the necessary behavioral changes are potentially significant. No longer is one subject to the effects of self-inflicted failure and its consequent guilt, shame, and remorse. Instead, one is empowered by a greater sense of control over previous sources of stress and by greatly elevated self-esteem.

Bonnie Waters, CEAP

Nancy L. Brown, LCSW

Jeff Fortgang, Ph.D.

*Massachusetts Lawyer Assistance Program*

*Reprinted with permission of Massachusetts Lawyer Assistance Program, Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, Inc.*

**REGRET FOR WASTED TIME IS MORE  
WASTED TIME.**      ~ *Mason Cooley*