

## Ep #17: Why We Procrastinate and How to Stop



### **Full Episode Transcript**

**With Your Host**

**Kristi Angevine**

## Ep #17: Why We Procrastinate and How to Stop

Welcome to Episode 17. In this episode, we will discuss procrastination and how you can find out why you do it, and how you can start to change it.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits and feel as good on the inside as they look on paper. You'll get practical strategies for mindset shifts that will help you finally understand the root causes of why you think, feel, and act as you do so you can learn to create habits that give more than they take. And now, here's your host physician and Master Certified Life Coach Kristi Angevine.

Hello there. I hope this episode finds you doing well. One of the reasons I started this podcast is so that I could be that voice that reminds you, there's nothing wrong with you. No matter what habits you're currently grappling with, no matter how many times you've tried to create a change, no matter what's recently happened in your life. You are not broken, you are not defective, you are not a problem that needs to be fixed.

Another part of my mission is to help you see how much agency you actually have, even if it's underneath layers, and layers, and layers of social conditioning, or inherited old programming that say otherwise. So, if today, you needed to hear that you're not broken, you're not a project to be worked on in order to be whole, and you have way more agency to create your own experience than you realize. Then, there you go.

I love thinking that the sentences that you hear on this podcast, they are thoughts that you can borrow. They are little seeds, and if they land just right, in the right conditions, at the right moment they might stick around and grow into a deeper belief.

So, let's get into procrastination. First, I'm going to define it. Then, I'm going to discuss the common reasons that we do it, and I'm going to cover some of the conventional advice that you'll hear. And then, I'm going to elaborate on what you should do before you implement strategies that you find on a Google search. And by the end, you'll have a simple two-step process that you can start using this week.

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What exactly is procrastination? The Oxford Dictionary describes it as the act of delaying something, usually because you do not want to do it. Now let's be real, we may want the thing done, but the starting and the doing it we just prefer not to do that part.

For me, my procrastination started early in elementary school. I delayed starting science projects. I delayed working on English papers. I delayed working on reports, of any kind, that were due in over a day or so. I procrastinated starting on my honors project in college. I had many nights at 2 a.m. thinking, never again.

I currently still procrastinate on my mock articles, and Ob-Gyns who are listening, you know what I'm talking about. But if you're not an Ob-Gyn, these are basically Ob-Gyn articles that you read and you answer questions about, in order to maintain your board certification. And every year, you have a full year to do them. Many years, a couple of weeks before they're due, there are swathes of Ob-Gyn across the country who are spending the end of November, the early part of December reading them.

So, why do we procrastinate? The high-level overview, in very general terms, is we procrastinate because there's a discrepancy between what we want long term and what we want in the moment. And, what we want in the moment usually wins. In the moment, at my daughter's soccer game, I want the doughnuts that they brought. In the long run, I want to eat less sugar. In the moment, I don't want to start my taxes. In the long run, I want them done; done well and done on time.

Evolutionarily, we're designed to prefer pleasure to work and drudgery. So, we procrastinate when in the present moment. Instant gratification is more compelling than doing what we want for our future self: Scrolling on my phone, instead of starting to write a podcast episode. Reading a few more pages, instead of starting the stretches that I say I want to do every day. Unloading the dishwasher, instead of going for a bike ride. Checking my email for the 10th time the last thirty minutes, instead of doing discharge summaries or organizing a dresser drawer.

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One of my clients calls her procrastination “procrasti-tivity.” And this is, basically, when a high achiever procrastinates by doing other productive things, like housecleaning, instead of something that they find less fun.

So, in addition to preferentially valuing present-moment pleasure over long term gain, another, more specific, reason that we might procrastinate includes perfectionism.

It's hard to start something if you know you won't be great at it, at first, and in the back of your mind, you make that mean that there's a problem with you. It's easier to procrastinate with lots of research, lots of passive consumption of information, than it is to begin with what you do know. Especially if you think there's a perfect first step that you must know before you begin.

Yet another procrastination influencer is, all-or-none thinking. Now, if you didn't hear Episode 16, from last week, it's all about the habit of dichotomous, all-or-nothing thinking. So, feel free to check that one out after this. All-or-none thinking shows up in procrastination like this: If my plan is to finish all my charts before I go home, and I have 30 minutes before I need to leave, why bother doing some of the charts in the 30 minutes that I do have, if I can't finish all of them? So, I might as well just not do any.

When you reflect on the reasons why you might procrastinate, what do you notice? Now, before we discuss ways to change procrastination, let's be clear about something. Procrastinating isn't inherently bad. Procrastinating is neutral, until you think a thought about it. For some people, their standard operating procedure for, say a work project, includes letting the idea marinate in their subconscious, and then starting to work on it 48 hours before it's due, and working intensely on it, up until the last minute.

There's nothing universally objectively wrong with procrastinating. It's only a problem for you, if you notice it repetitively brings you distress, or creates an experience you don't enjoy. So, if procrastination is something you do, but it does not create a negative experience, my invitation is that you don't make yourself wrong for doing it. And then, as you listen to the rest of this

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episode, when I say procrastination, you can simply insert another activity that you want to change, another habit you would like to change, and the approach will be equally revealing and equally effective for you.

But if you are like me, and you've had procrastination drama that you would prefer not to have, how do we begin to change it? If you google "how to stop procrastinating," you will see a plethora of tips, and hacks, and strategies that all promise to stop the habit, once and for all. And, many of them are really solid ideas.

The Pomodoro Technique uses the timer to break work blocks into intervals, so you ultimately cultivate a sense of discrete focus time. Many sources advise; just start, or gently force yourself to take the first step. Because once we start and work for about ten minutes, the task often seems less onerous, and motivation to actually continue working, often comes after we start, not before we start.

Other sources recommend that you discover what triggers and exacerbates procrastination for you. Is procrastination worse when you're tired? Do you mainly procrastinate if the deadline is distant? Do you procrastinate more if it's an internally versus an externally created deadline? Is it with tasks where you have impostor-ism or perfectionism?

The author of *Atomic Habits*, James Clear, he offers making the rewards and consequences of taking action more immediate in the present moment. We don't as easily appreciate the benefit that will reap in ten years of, say saving for retirement or getting started on a work task, as easily as we appreciate the allure of instant gratification.

So, we can capitalize on this phenomenon by making the rewards and consequences much more immediate. Clear suggests using "temptation bundling." Temptation bundling is a concept that came out of the work by Katy Milkman, at the University of Pennsylvania. Temptation bundling is where you pair a behavior that's good for you in the long run, with one that feels good in the short term. So, only do the thing you love, while doing the thing you procrastinate on.

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For example, only watch your favorite show while doing chores, or only listen to a podcast while you exercise. Now all of these are great ideas, and for some of you, these behavioral tips will be all you need. But in order to address a more chronic habit of procrastination, we need to dig a little deeper.

Everyone will have a slightly different flavor surrounding what procrastination looks like, what tasks you do it with, circumstantial triggers like time of day, how fatigued you are, how many decisions you've already made, etc. For some of you, perfectionism may be the main culprit. For others, it may be all-or-none thinking. Or, if you're like most of us, it's usually a blend of multiple factors. No matter what your unique flavor surrounding it is, we procrastinate because we're thinking feeling something that drives us to procrastinate.

Once you know what you are personally thinking and feeling that drives you to procrastinate, then you'll better understand why you do it. And once you understand your unique reasons why you do it, then you can more easily start to change it. Without knowing this, you can try out every behavioral hack, tip, and anti-procrastination program there is out there, but it will only temporarily help.

This is because the root cause of your procrastination is overlooked. And the root cause is, whatever you're thinking and feeling. Let me give you an example to explain what I mean about using a behavioral approach to solve for a behavioral issue.

Say you want to eat more freshly prepared meals. But for years, you've gotten into a routine of going to restaurants, drive-throughs, and getting delivery. So, in your effort to make a change, you go wild ordering cookbooks from *Thug Kitchen* and Jamie Oliver. You do meal prep delivery service. You start watching *America's Test Kitchen* videos and *Milk Street TV*. And for a few weeks, you're on a roll. But then, you slip back into your old patterns, eventually.

Why? Well, you try to change an old habit with new actions, without understanding what drove the old actions, in the first place. You can have a

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refrigerator full of fresh food, all the instructions, a great plan for the week written out. But if you're still coming home thinking, "Meh, that's a lot of work. I just want something fast and easy. I'll start tomorrow," then, no matter what you are doing to change the habit, it won't actually have an impact.

So, let's bring it back to the habit of procrastination, and why it matters to know why you're doing it. We're going to use the example of exercise. One person might procrastinate on exercising because when she's tried it in the past, she never ultimately saw a difference in how she felt or the results that she wanted. So now, when it comes time to do it, she perpetually thinks, "It won't matter. It won't make a difference anyways." And when she thinks that she feels ambivalent. And when she feels ambivalent, it's very easy to procrastinate.

Another person might procrastinate on exercising because she thinks that she should be fitter than she is. So, every time it's time to start, her inner critic is really loud and says things like, "How lame! You call that exercise? You're never going to make this stick. You're not the kind of person who follows through." And no surprise, every time she goes to start, she feels defeated and discouraged, which makes it so much easier to procrastinate.

And let's look at a third person. A third person may procrastinate with exercise because she thinks, "I'll get to it later. This other thing I'm doing right now, is just much more important. It'll be fine." And she feels relaxed and permissive.

Every one of us has different thoughts and feelings that drive the same action of procrastinating, which is why a generic approach isn't universally effective. So, how do you go about finding your unique reasons that you procrastinate?

There are two main steps. The next time you find yourself procrastinating, or you notice you are about to procrastinate, I want you to pause, literally stop what you're doing, and pause for about 30-60 seconds. During this pause, ask yourself: What am I feeling? What am I feeling right now? Or, what was I feeling right before I wanted to procrastinate? What emotion? It

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may take a few tries to identify this, but keep at it. Find out: Was it overwhelm? Was it anxiety? Was it permissiveness? Was it ambivalence? Was it dread? What emotion were you, or are you feeling?

Then, the next step requires that you put on your detective hat and work backwards. What were you thinking that made you feel that emotion? Were you thinking, "There's not enough time," and feeling overwhelmed? Were you thinking, "It won't matter," and feeling ambivalent? Was it, "Ugh, why did I sign up for this? This is going to be so hard. I don't want to do it," and feeling dread?

This week, I invite you to start paying really careful attention, and start seeing what is your particular set of thoughts and feelings that precede procrastination. Now if you're thinking, "Why the hell do I care what I'm thinking and feeling beforehand? I just want to fix the action." Don't worry, I'm going to explain it all.

Knowing these elements is really critical, because knowing the thoughts and feelings that drive your habit of procrastination is like pulling back the curtain and being able to see what's actually going on. Or, opening the door and turning on the light to that room where, maybe, you shove everything when company is coming over and you have chaos; the can't-have-anyone-over syndrome.

The root cause of procrastination is what you're thinking and feeling. Now, there's also amazing deep work that you can do with a therapist or coach to figure out, exactly, why you repetitively have the particular thoughts and feelings that you have, to find out the rules, and beliefs, and experiences that may underpin your thoughts. And, I highly recommend that work.

But for starters, it suffices to say, unveiling the thoughts and feelings can be a total game changer. It's a game changer because once you know them, you have awareness, and awareness is not something you can undo. It's something you build upon and deepen with repetition. But once you have it and cultivate it, you are now on to yourself.

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What happens when you identify the thinking and feeling that drives procrastination for you is this, you can eventually start catching yourself early in the act of procrastinating, or sometimes right before you procrastinate, in the moment, where you have that preceding emotion. And, sometimes you might even notice you're thinking the thoughts that you've identified. Once you notice yourself doing this, that's when you've opened the door to interrupting this pattern.

A “pattern interrupt” is where you deliberately pivot from the trajectory that you would be on if you were not aware. And, a pivot can take a variety of forms. What a pivot looks like and sounds like is up to you, as only you are going to figure out what combination of observational statements and redirecting statements that you love.

What I'm going to share here is not necessarily a formula, but just a variety of ideas to inspire you, as you go on to find your own. So, one way a pivot might look, is to pause and say to yourself, “I noticed I really want to procrastinate right now. I notice I'm feeling dread, because I'm thinking, ‘Oh, I hate getting out of bed when it's cold’.” Or, I'm thinking, “This has to be good. I also know that once I get started, I'll feel better. Yes, I hate getting out of bed when it's cold. But I also don't love not following through. So, Sweet Pea, let's do this.”

It might sound like, “Aha! I heard it. I noticed I was thinking, ‘I'll get to it later.’ I've learned that's a well-intended lie. I won't get to it later.”

Personally, I love, and have started using what I learned from Janette Dalglish. She says, “The container of today is sacred.” And, this action belongs in the container of today. You can even add on a reminder, something to the tune of, “I love how I feel when I prioritize myself.” If you don't know Janet, she'll be linked in the show notes.

Then, once you've interrupted the usual pattern, that's when you get to use all the cool behavioral advice. You can shamelessly bribe yourself; you can do Katie Milkman's temptation bundling; you can set a timer and use the Pomodoro Technique to just get out whatever you're procrastinating on for ten minutes. You can start by starting, you can break your task into

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manageable chunks, you can remind yourself of your deep, compelling why. All of these actions are much more effective, once they're preceded by pivoting from the previous thought feeling duo.

So, now you understand that we procrastinate because instant gratification is more compelling than long term gratification. We preferentially act on behalf of our present self over our future self. Some of us procrastinate because of all-or-none thinking or perfectionism.

You know that all the tips and strategies in the world will fall flat if you don't know what you're personally thinking and feeling. That drives you to prioritize the present moment pleasure over long term gains. And, to find out your unique thoughts and feelings will call on you to be the observer of your own thoughts and feelings.

As a tip, when I'm doing this work, I like to think of myself as a researcher or a detective on the hunt to find the clues that will help explain what's going on behind my behavior.

Your work this week is this: Notice when you procrastinate, and pay attention to the unique circumstances around it for you. Start paying attention to what you are feeling right before you procrastinate. Then, work backwards and figure out what you were thinking that creates that emotion for you. And, that's it.

With this awareness, you will naturally give yourself opportunities to intervene, pivot, and take a different action. Now, there are two last things I want you to keep in mind. Number one, knowing about this intellectually, and actually applying this exercise in real life, are two completely different things. It's the difference between reading a cookbook versus actually cooking the recipe. I want to invite you to actually apply this in your real life.

And, number two, this exercise is not a one-and-done thing. Yes, we can gain awareness and learn new ways to behave. But keep in mind, it took thousands of times thinking something, feeling something, and procrastinating to create that habit. So, it's 100% normal for it to take repetition for you to unlearn the old way, and to learn a new way.

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I want to encourage you to be patient with yourself. The fastest way to stymie progress is to channel your inner drill sergeant critic and that inner judge, and tell yourself mean things like, “You should be doing this faster. You should be better than you are. This shouldn't be so hard.”

And that is all, for the episode on procrastination.

Again, if you like what you've heard, come join the email list. You can go to [HabitsOnPurpose.com](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com) and join right there. Or, come find me on Instagram @Kristie.Angevine and/or join the Habits On Purpose Facebook community.

If you're listening to this near May 25, 2022, near the date of the podcast release, the next round of Habits On Purpose for Physicians Small Group Coaching is currently open for enrollment. If you're a female physician, and you want to better understand your habits and learn to actually apply pragmatic tools to create new ones, go to [HabitsOnPurpose.com](https://HabitsOnPurpose.com) for all the information.

And, if you are a trainee, a resident or a fellow, there are a few scholarship spots where you can join the program completely free. The recent JAMA randomized clinical trial, by doctors Tyra Faindstad and Adrienne Mann, clearly outlines the benefit of an online coaching program for residents, in terms of its impact on emotional exhaustion and wellbeing. I'm here to be part of the solution for resident burnout.

That's all for this episode. See you next time.

If you want to learn more about how to better understand your patterns, stop feeling reactionary, and get back into the proverbial driver's seat with your habits, you'll want to join my email list which you can find linked in the show notes. Or, if you go to [www.HabitsOnPurpose.com](https://www.HabitsOnPurpose.com) you'll find it right there.

If you're serious about taking this work deeper and going from an intellectual understanding to off the page implementation, I offer coaching in two flavors: individual deep-dive coaching with the somatic and cognitive approach, and a small group coaching program. The small group is

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currently for women physicians only, and comes with CME credits. You can be the first to learn more about the individual or group coaching options by getting on the email list.

Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit [www.HabitsOnPurpose.com](http://www.HabitsOnPurpose.com). Tune in next week for another episode.