Lynne Goodacre

Getting to grips with procrastination

Welcome to

Getting to grips with procrastination

I wonder if there's something else you should be doing right now?

Did you come across this download whilst in the middle of something else and get distracted and diverted? Was reading this really at the top of you to do list today?

Do you have a decision to make or something to do that keeps getting put on the back burner? Perhaps your workload feels overwhelming and yet you seem to be shuffling the same things over and over again. Maybe there's a difficult phone call you need to make that you never quite get round to. Do any of these scenarios sound familiar to you?

Perhaps you're the person in the team who is always 'just in time'. Burning the midnight oil to get something completed minutes before the deadline. Telling yourself that you work better under pressure as you run around like a headless chicken when the printer runs out of ink 10 minutes before you need the document.

Do you long to be the person who cracks on with the task in hand, gets the report in with plenty of time to spare, prepares their presentation weeks in advance?

Well here's a question - are you willing to start getting tougher with yourself, holding yourself to account and building some intention into your schedule? If so brilliant. Let's dive in and do some work together.

…… or maybe time to make a coffee and catch up with a friend!

Lynne

What is procrastination?

If you type the word, 'procrastination' into any search engine you will come up with literally millions of hits. So, before going any further let's make sure we're all on the same page in terms of what we mean by procrastination. The definition I'm going with is:

Voluntarily delaying an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay.

Put this way it's a bit bonkers isn't it? It's something we do to ourselves in the knowledge that things will only get worse. How crazy is that?

We knowingly put ourselves under pressure and force ourselves to work from a place of stress and anxiety. If that wasn't bad enough even when the job is done we don't necessarily feel the reward of doing a job well. We may not feel great about the output, being left with the feeling, *'I know I could have done a better job if I'd given myself more time'*.

Or conversely be kicking ourselves and wondering why we put something we'd been dreading doing off for long, *'It wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be."*

If we are a part of a team our tendency to procrastinate may impact also on our colleagues as we push deadlines to their limits, place pressure on other people to stop what they're doing to help us out or to give us the vital information we suddenly realise we need to complete the task in hand.

Kinds of procrastination

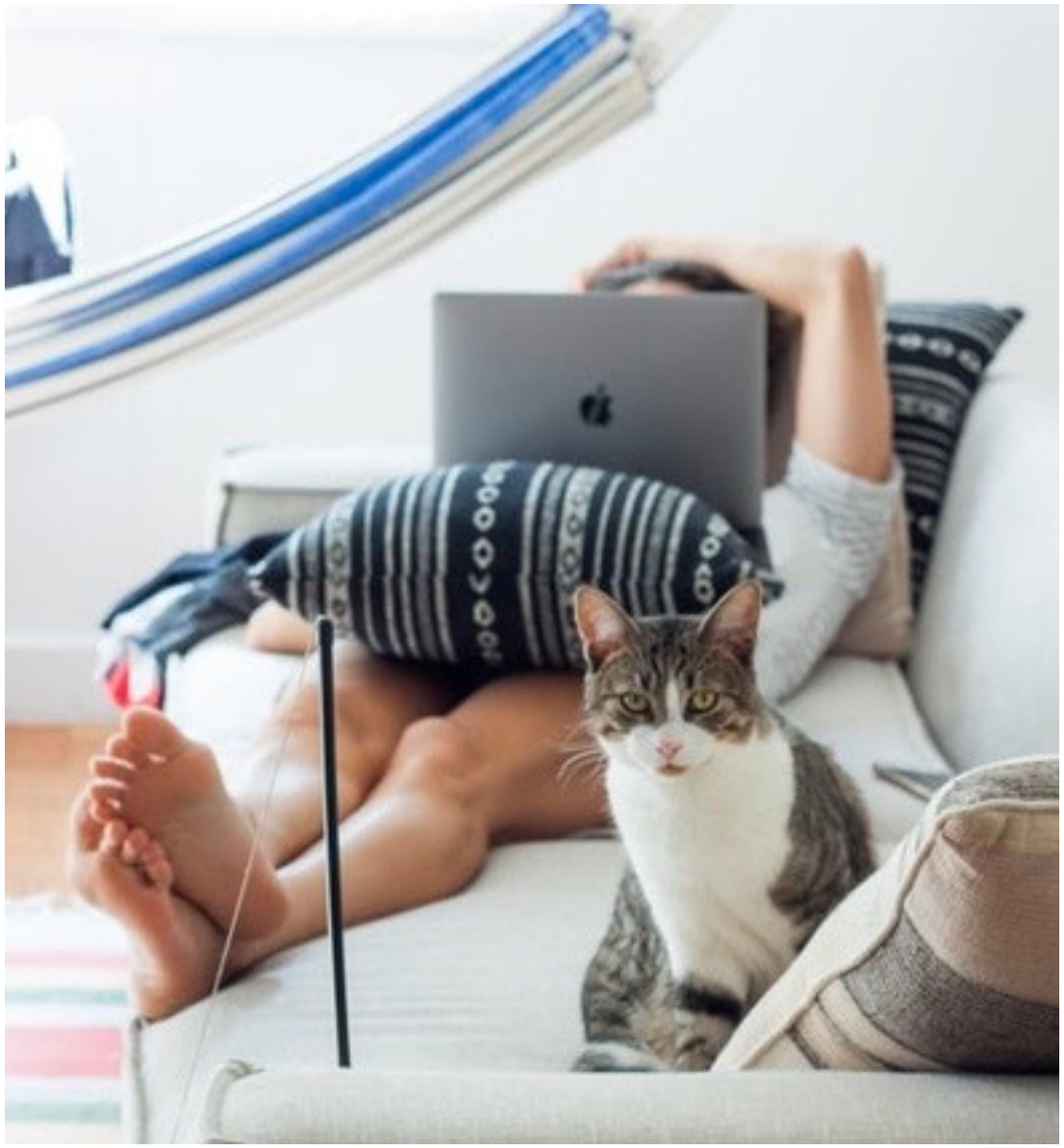
There are two ways to think about procrastination:

1. Obvious displacement activities

2. Advanced displacement activities

Let's think about obvious displacement first. This is the kind of procrastination when you know exactly what you are doing. You probably feel a little uncomfortable/guilty at the time. There may be a nagging feeling in the back of your mind, 'I should be getting on with….'

You know you have a long list of things to do and yet you allow yourself to become diverted. You take an extended coffee break, agree to meet a friend for lunch, start searching for a key document on the internet and end up looking at our next holiday destination. Suddenly the cleaning or ironing develops a magnetic pull. Hand on heart you know exactly what you are putting off.



What about advanced displacement? This is somewhat trickier to nail down because, in this instance, you convince yourself that you are engaged in activities which make you feel like you're doing something towards the task in hand.

It feels really important to tidy your desk so that you have a clear space to help you approach the task with a clear mind. You really do need to put all your references in alphabetical order or go and check something out with just one more person before you start the job. The problem is, however, that you are not doing the one thing you need to be doing.

One way of thinking about advanced displacement is to think about the distinction between:

Rationalise
or
Rational Lies

In advanced displacement we are telling ourselves rational lies.

Why do we do it?

If you're a procrastinator it's likely that one of the reasons is that you have what is called a 'present bias', a tendency to put more weight on immediate gratification than on the gratification you get from completing something you predict will be difficult, boring or take several months to complete.

There is a wonderful TED Talk from Tim Urban called *Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator* which is well worth 18 minutes of your time. In the video you will be introduced to the *Instant Gratification Monkey* and its ability to hijack your best intentions and plans. If you are a procrastinator it will not only resonate but also make you smile.

The pull of instant gratification is being exploited to great effect by the likes of Email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Whats App. They tempt you with notifications that pop up on your screen and lure you away from what you are doing. You 'have' to check to see what someone is saying, who tagged you or liked you and before you know it you've lost concentration on the task you were in the middle of or dropped what you were doing to reply to someones email.

These small, quick rewards give our brains a blast of dopamine which feeds our desire for more rewards. "I wonder how many people liked my Tweet". That deadline which is a month away becomes a dim and distant memory as you are lured by your technology.

So, how do we start to move ourselves out of this behaviour? This is where it gets challenging because we are talking here about an issue of self-regulation. If you want to stop procrastinating you have to start being honest with yourself about what you are doing and, as importantly, holding yourself to account.

On the next page is a 3 step process based around recognising what is happening, understanding why and then doing something about it.

The 3 ‘W’ questions

What’s going on here?

What is causing me to behave in this way?

Which strategy can I use to get me moving?

1. Whats' going on here?

The first question is designed to help you become more aware and honest with yourself about your procrastination behaviours. To get in touch with your procrastination behaviour let's visit that place and get to know the kinds of things that lure you away from the task in hand.

What are your favourite procrastination behaviours?
Use this space to jot them down.

Let's think about this a little more creatively and connect a little deeper.

If procrastination were room what would be in it to distract you? What does it feel like to be there?

How about doing some doodling or, if that's not your thing, jot down what comes up for you.

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Just for a moment let's do the same exercise but connect with what you feel like when you've completed something. Let's call it the space of '**job done'.**

If 'job done' were a place what kind of place would it be?

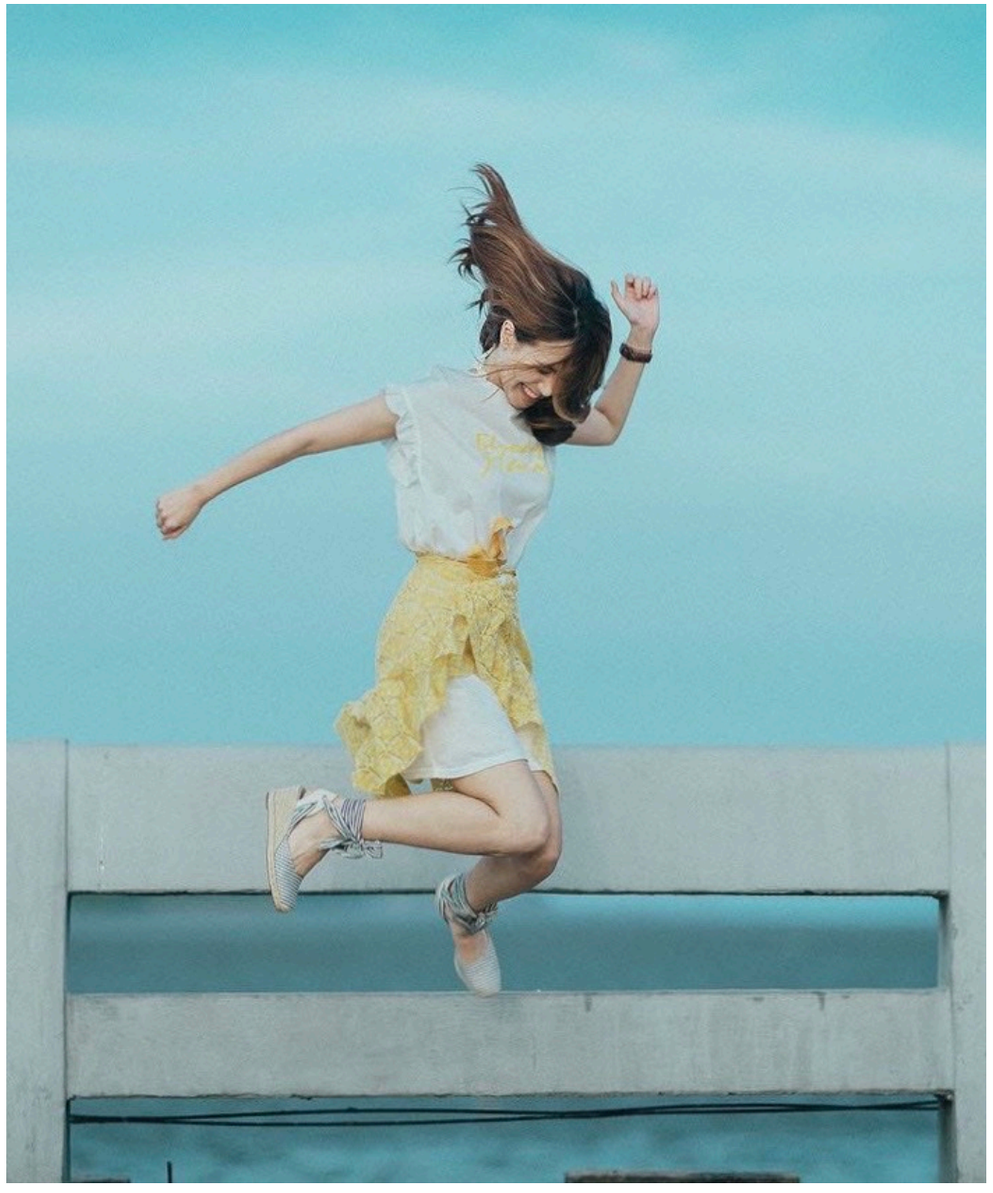
What would be going on? What does it feel like to be there?

When you compare those two places what comes up for you?

I'm guessing it's pretty clear which place you would rather be in.

Welcome to the first strategy for your procrastination busting tool box.

Recognising and being honest with yourself about what is going on.



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2. What is causing me to behave in this way?

There are a number of reasons why we procrastinate and possibly top of your list is poor time management. ‘How can I make more effective use of my time?’

This may be the case and if so the internet is full of advice and ideas about how to manage your time more effectively. However, if you look at the list opposite of the most common reasons for procrastination you will see that it can be caused by a number of different factors. Some of which have an emotional basis. It may not all be about the way you manage your time.

The reason it is important to question the basis of your procrastination is because this will point you towards the kind of strategy you need to pull out of your tool box.

For example if you are feeling overwhelmed by a task you need to respond in a different way to if you find the task boring.

This step requires you to pause and take a moment to reflect on what is holding you up. To ask yourself, ‘Why am I putting this off?’

- **I find the task boring/it has has no personal meaning to me**
- **I’m confused and don’t understand what I’m meant to be doing**
- **I’m feeling overwhelmed by the task**
- **I feel no sense of achievement or satisfaction in doing the task**
- **I’m afraid I’m going to fail**

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3. Which strategy can I use in this situation?

As there is no single cause for procrastinating it makes sense that there is no such thing as a single answer. Once you have worked out why you are procrastinating you can dip into your tool box of strategies and pull out the appropriate tool. Here are some strategies that you may find helpful.

Stop waiting to feel motivated

It is easy to tell ourselves that we're not in the right mood to do something. We need to wait for the muse to descend before we start writing the report. The weather to change before we have that difficult conversation. The final reminder to arrive before we do our travel expenses.

Here's the thing, that time will probably never come. What will come however is a self-imposed stress response when you realise you have only one day left before the deadline and you're still not in the 'right mood' but are now forced to get on with the job in hand.

Getting started on the task is one way to feel motivated which, in many cases, can lead to more motivation. For example, if you are putting off starting to write a report set yourself a target of writing for 10 minutes. Before you know it you may find the following happens:

Build in accountability

In getting to grips with procrastination you are really starting to hold yourself to account. This is about getting tougher with yourself, really checking in with those rational lies you are telling yourself.

One way of doing this is to write down what you need to do and when you are going to do it by. Be specific and write in an exact date and time. Maybe draw yourself a 'time to complete' chart and cross off the hours or days as they go by.

If you're not very good at holding yourself to account another option is to build in some external accountability. Tell someone else your target deadline and ask them to check in with you to see if you have done what you said you would do.

A word of warning here - be careful who you ask. You need someone who will hold you to account but not become a constant nag. The latter could lead to the end of a beautiful friendship or relationship so choose carefully.

Make bite sized chunks from large tasks which feel overwhelming.

Large tasks can feel overwhelming and, if they spread over several months, the personal reward we feel when we complete them is also long way off. You may also feel that you aren't achieving anything because the only way you can clear the task off of your to do list is to complete it and that will take months. Think back to the earlier comments about our bias for immediate rewards and use this to your advantage.

Break a large task down into small components and build in rewards for completion of each component. For example, if you are writing a report or a paper for publication break it down into sections and put the sections on your 'to do list'. The task starts to feel more manageable, you feed your instant gratification fix by being able to tick things off your list and, before you know it, your in the land of job done!

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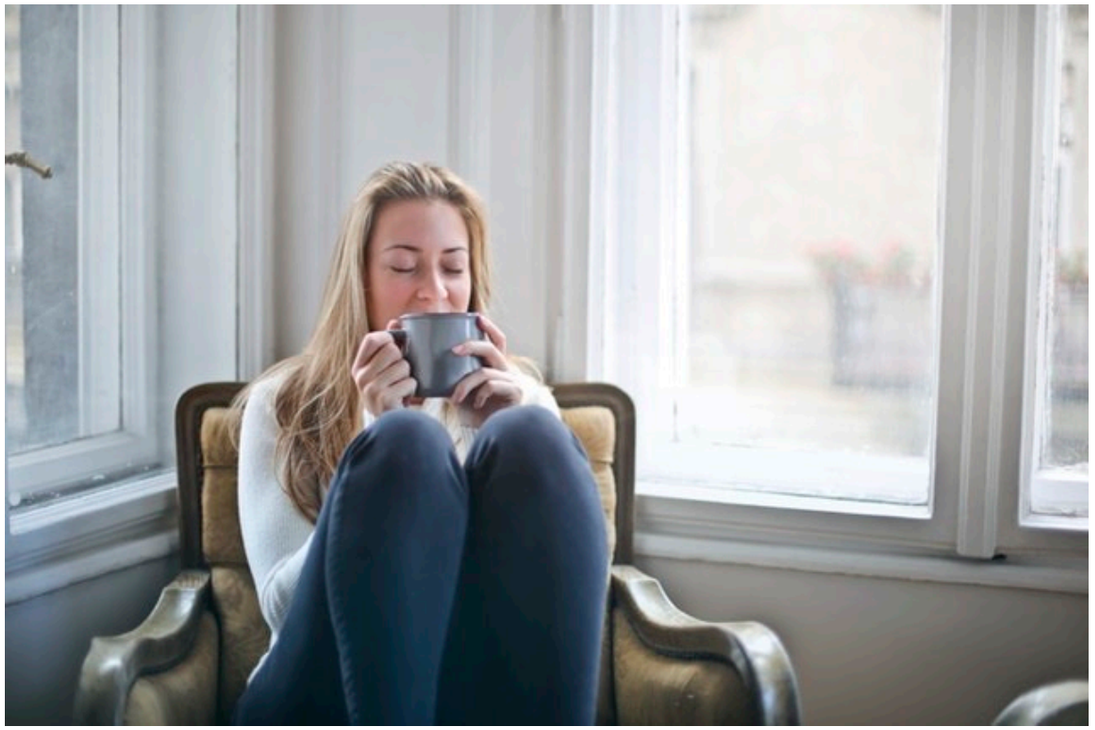

Tap into the long view

This can be especially helpful if you are working on a long-term project that spans several months or even years. Perhaps you have started an educational programme spanning 2 or 3 years or are leading on the implementation of a major change at work. You wouldn't be human if you didn't reach a point where your commitment levels dropped and focus became more of a challenge.

Connecting with the reasons for doing what you are doing and what it will feel like when you've completed the task can help you to reconnect with task. Really get into that space and take a few moments to sit quietly and think about what called you to do this work in the first place and what life will be like when it is complete.

Maybe build yourself a mood board using pictures or photos that connect you with those feelings, include pictures of rewards you will give yourself at the end.

If you use Pintrest create a private board. When the going gets tough use these images to reconnect and reenergise.

Know your golden hours

We all have times during the day when we are at our most productive. My golden hours are first thing in the morning and late afternoon.

Our brains function better, our heads are more clear and our energy levels are higher. When are you at your best?

Start to use this knowledge and time wisely to tackle the things that you find challenging. Make a conscious effort to plan your time well.

Conversely, if possible, don't plan to tackle the hardest tasks of the day when you know you are at your least productive.

Do nothing

Ok so this may sound a bit 'out there' but it's worth a go. If you are meant to be doing something and find yourself procrastinating make yourself do nothing - yes literally nothing. Don't dip into your emails or social media. If you have allocated the time to read or write something sit at your desk.

Just sit there. It's a challenge and you may just find that the boredom of doing nothing shifts you from procrastinating into action.

Eat the Frog

Mark Twain once said that if the first thing you have to do each morning is eat a live frog you can go through the day knowing you've probably done the worst thing that will happen to you all day. He added that if you have 2 frogs to eat, eat the ugliest one first.

If you have a task you're not looking forward to doing – do it first thing. Putting it off throughout the day probably means that it doesn't get done. It's too easy to find something else to do. You may also spend a lot of time during the day being distracted by the thought of what you've got to do. Bite the bullet and put it at the top of your 'to do' list and get it over and done with.

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Let go of being perfect

This may sound a bit counter intuitive but sometimes we hold on to something for way to long because we are avoiding handing it in or signing it off. “What if it’s not right, not good enough’, “we might have made a mistake’.

If you are editing/re-writing something for the 9th time, re-arranging the graphics etc. etc. it is worth checking in with yourself by asking, ‘What am I avoiding? Is it time to let go?’ When we are concerned about failing or being perceived as lacking knowledge or expertise our inner critic can kick in and conjure up all kinds of self-critical talk. It can make us hang on to something way after we should have let it go making minute changes which have no real impact on the quality of the work.

It’s OK to ask for help

If you remember back to the common reasons for procrastination one of them was not being clear about what is required. We don’t understand what we’re meant to be doing or are confused by the information we’ve been given so we procrastinate.

This is another situation in which our inner critic may have a field day by saying things like, ‘you should know what to do’, ‘they are going to think you’re not up to the job if you ask for help’, ‘you’re the only one who doesn’t know how to do this’.

Well one thing’s for sure if you don’t ask for help or guidance it isn’t going to get any easier, in fact it will become more challenging as time goes by.

Pause for a moment and sort out in our own mind what information you need to enable you to move forward with the task? Try to get clear in your thinking. What exactly do you need to move you forward and from whom? When you are clear, quieten your inner critic, bite the bullet and ask the appropriate person for support.

This strategy and the previous one have made reference to the way in which the impact of our inner critic can lead to procrastination. If the concept of the inner critic is new to you, you might want to check out the ebook I have written on Quietening Your Inner Critic.

Work in a conducive environment

Are you easily distracted by other people or noise around you? Tempted to join in with conversations you over hear?

If you need to focus on a task and are easily distracted think about where you work best and take yourself there. This may mean taking yourself to where no-one will come knocking on your door, negotiating to work from home or using a headset to reduce external noise.

Our working environment is an important factor in how focused and effective we are. So get to know the kinds of environments that suit different aspects of your work and use this information to your advantage

Note – this isn’t always a quiet place, some people find they work well in a coffee bar surrounded by a background hum. Find a place that works for you.

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Overcoming the lure of technology

Possibly one of the biggest forms of distraction for the procrastinator is the technology we carry around with us. It demands our attention.

It is designed to feed on our need for instant gratification. The notifications that fly across your screen calling to be looked at, the pings and buzzes that accompany your notifications on social media. It's so tempting to stop whatever it is you were focused on and have a peep to see who has just contacted you. Before you know it you are sending a reply of returning an email and you have lost your focus.

This is one area where, as a procrastinator you really have to start holding yourself to account and exercising an element of self-control.

Some tips are:

- Set yourself specific times during the day for emails and, if you really need to be available, let people know that's what you will be doing and if they need to contact you urgently to call you.

- Switch off the notifications on things like email, Twitter, Facebook, Whats App etc so that you aren't lured away by those messages telling you that you have an email or someone has replied to a tweet.

- If you're not convinced that you have enough self-control to resist these temptations explore some of the apps that have been developed to support you with this endeavour e.g. Self-control, Freedom or Heyfocus.

They are designed to deny you access to emails and social media for a period of time that you determine. You do have the ability to set them up so that specific emails do get delivered if you need to do that but otherwise they literally lock you out of these distractions.

A strategy to help with writing

The Pomodoro Technique has been around for quite a while. The idea is to work in 25 minute blocks of time. Set a timer and once you have completed 25 minutes take a short break and do something that isn't work related. Make a drink, change your position, take a short 5 minute walk.

If you complete 4 blocks in succession, hurrah, give yourself a longer break of 20-30 minutes. You can find out more about this technique and even buy a tomato shaped timer from: https://cirillocompany.de/pages/pomodoro-technique

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A final recap.

In this workbook you have been introduced to a three stage process to start getting to grips with procrastination. It is based on asking yourself 3 questions:

1. What is going on here?
2. What is causing me to behave in this way?
3. Which strategy can I use to get me moving?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were that easy? But as you no doubt know it's not. This is on going work.

The more you use these tools the better you will become at reducing the amount of time you procrastinate. I have included some strategies here and there are more available on the internet. However, before you spend the next hour have a look ask yourself one question, "What's going on here!"

Acknowledgements

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About me

Here are some bottom-line pieces of information. I'm a personal coach, writer, researcher and occupational therapist and have worked in the public and voluntary sectors for many years before developing my coaching practice.

Through my clinical practice I have supported people from all walks of life as they've navigated living with long-term health conditions.

Through my research I have sought to understand how people experience living with a long term health conditions and supported health professionals as they develop as health researchers.

As a professional coach I am now working with a wide range of women as they explore areas of their personal development.

Many of the things I write about are informed by issues which crop up on a regular basis in my coaching practice. I appreciate that not everyone is in a position to work with a personal coach and so this workbook is designed as an introduction to some of the work you can do through self-coaching.

It is easy to view procrastination as a consequence of poor time management, and that may be the case. However I find that if we dig a little deeper there is often another reason that is holding us back. I hope, as you have read through this short introduction, it has given you cause to pause and reflect and, more importantly introduced you to some strategies that are helpful in moving you forward.

Find out more about my work as a personal coach, ebooks and courses by checking my website www.lgpersonaldevelopment.co.uk or follow me on Twitter @lynnegoodace.

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