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Understanding the procrastination cycle

CHEAT SHEET



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<https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/counselling/procrastination-cycle>

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Introduction



*“I like work: it fascinates me.
I can sit and look at it for hours.”*

- Jerome K. Jerome

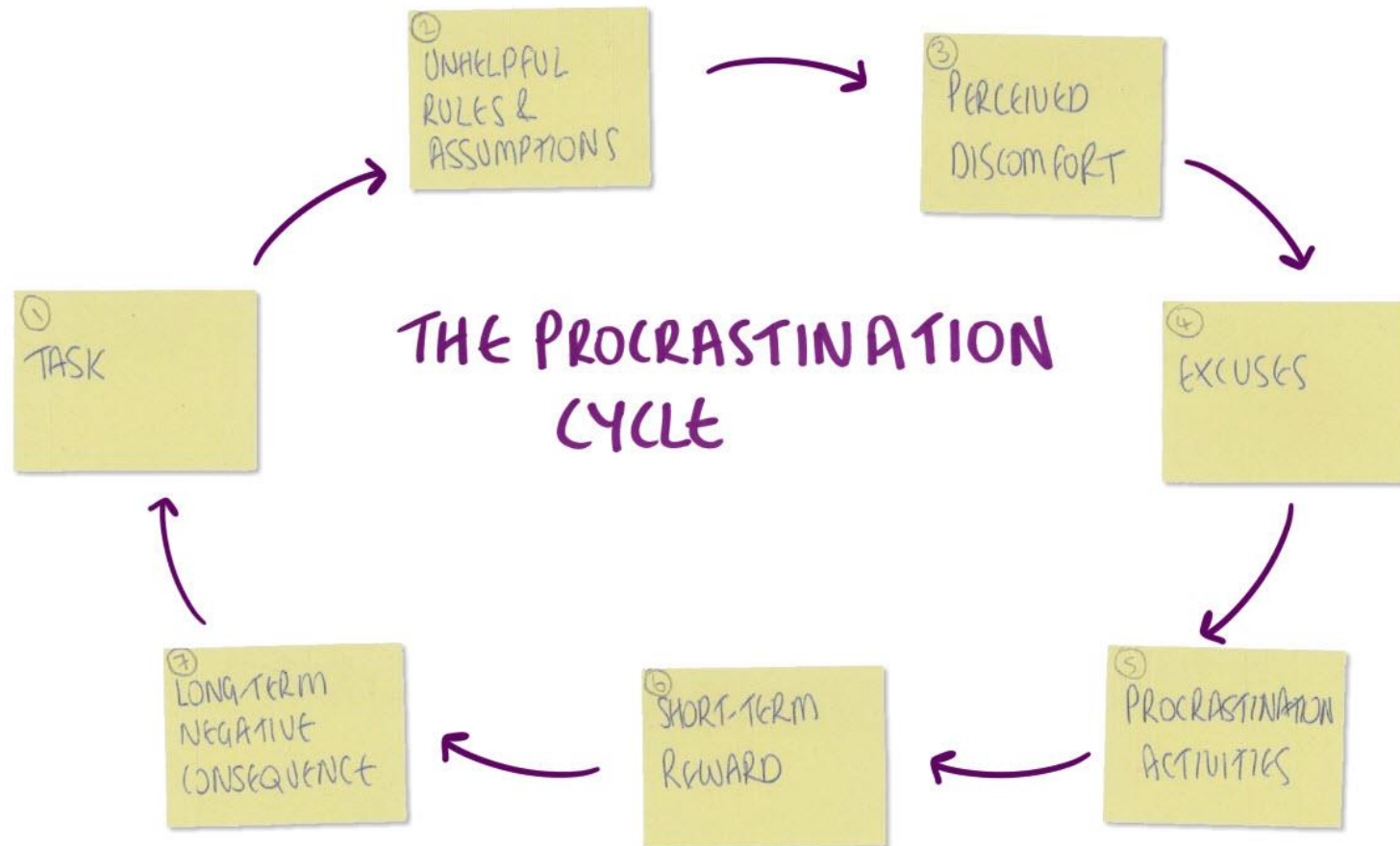
Sound familiar?

Don't worry, procrastination is something that affects everyone from time to time. However, a proper understanding of the reasons behind this behaviour can help you to overcome it.

This resource will help you to explore your own behaviour and recognise how it is rooted in certain negative thoughts and emotions.

Introduction

While our reasons for putting things off will vary according to our individual attitudes and habits, all procrastination tends toward the same pattern. In this section we'll examine the procrastination cycle.



The cycle

1. Task

All procrastination starts here. I have a task, challenge or goal to achieve.

2. Unhelpful thoughts & assumptions

We often start with some unhelpful mental rules or assumptions that get in our way. Some of the most common are:

- I need to be in charge
- Life's too short
- I'm too tired
- I can't do it
- If I don't try, I can't fail
- It must be perfect

The cycle

3. Perceived discomfort

My mental rules and assumptions make me feel anxious and uncomfortable, so I look for escape. I feel anxious and uncomfortable, so I look for escape.

4. Excuses

In looking to escape the discomfort, I generate excuses.

- I don't have all everything I need
- I don't have enough time to do it all now
- I'm not motivated enough now
- There's plenty of time to do it later
- It's too nice a day to be reading indoors
- I've got to ring my parents/clean the house/eat some toast first

The cycle

5. Procrastination activities

I engage in any activity other than the task at hand. Procrastination activities are more pleasurable but considerably less important than my original task.

6. Short-term reward

In doing more pleasurable activities than my original task, I get a short term reward in enjoying the activity I'm doing and avoiding the potential discomfort that would have resulted from my unhelpful rules and assumptions.

This short-term reward reinforces the benefits of procrastination.

The cycle

7. Long-term negative consequences

My urge to procrastinate is intensified. I now consider my original task to be even more unpleasant than before, my unhelpful rules and assumptions are reinforced, and the perceived discomfort is intensified.

I continue to procrastinate, my work piles up and I feel stressed.

The cycle continues.

Interrupting the cycle

Now that you understand more about the process behind procrastination you can consider strategies which will help you overcome it.

At every stage of the procrastination cycle you have a chance to intervene and break free from negative habits

There are three key areas that you can use to interrupt the cycle:

Problem 1: Unhelpful rules & assumptions.

Solution: adjust or substitute.

Problem 2: Avoiding discomfort.

Solution: learn how to tolerate discomfort.

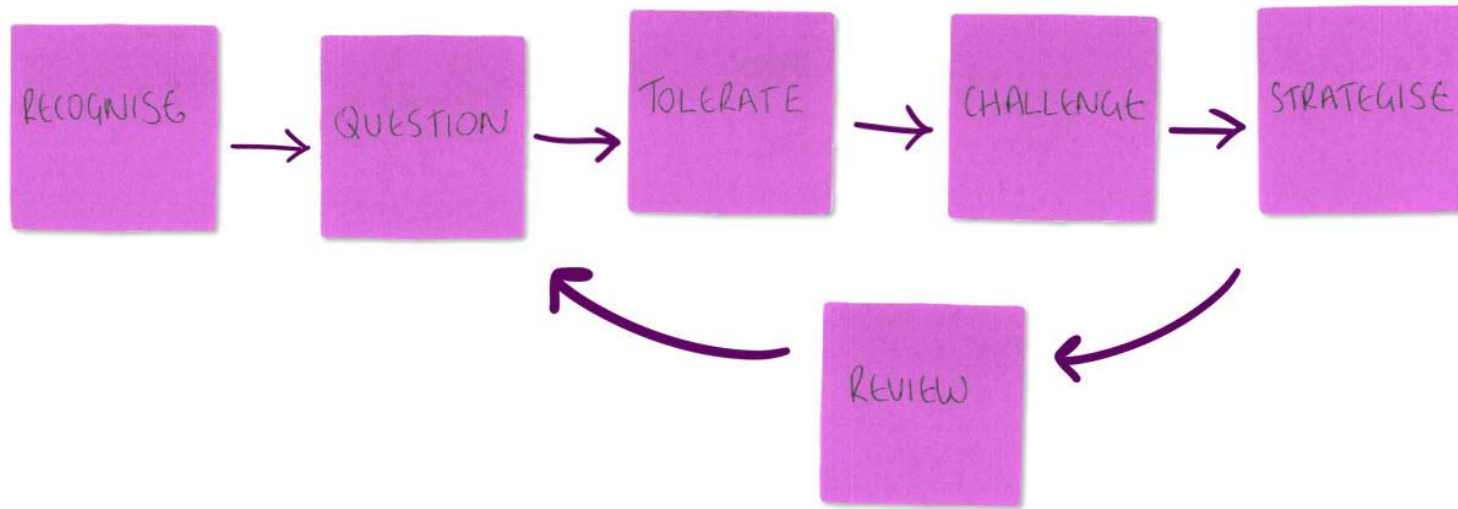
Problem 3: Excuses.

Solution: learn how to challenge and dismiss them.

You may adopt one or more of these strategies, depending on which stages of the cycle you identify with most.

Interrupting the cycle: the process

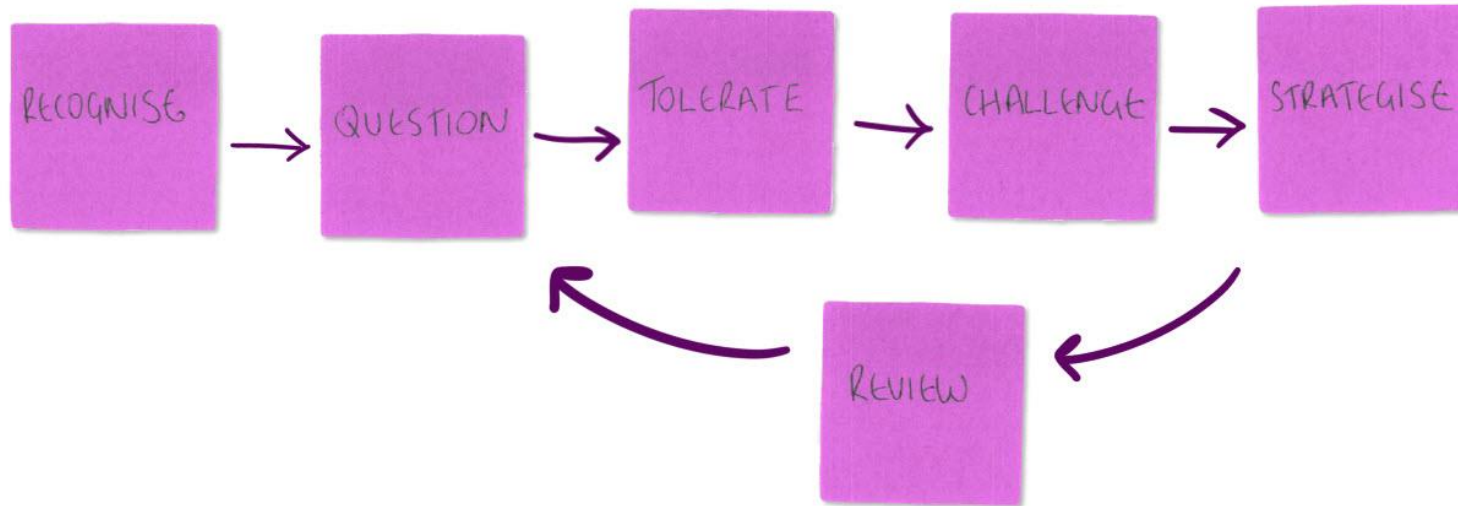
This strategy will help you to overcome the procrastination cycle.



1. Recognise: First you must understand your own cycle of behaviour and the triggers which lead to it. Once you identify the thoughts and emotions which trigger your negative response patterns it will be easier to deal with them.

2. Question: When those negative thoughts and feeling arise, don't let them boss you! Question them instead. Are they logical? Are they based on anything that has actually happened?

Interrupting the cycle: the process



3. Tolerate: Don't be afraid of these negative thoughts and feelings. Recognise how you are feeling, and learn to tolerate this discomfort.

4. Challenge: Take a step back. When you are about to put off your work ask yourself, what is more important? How am I likely to feel after putting off my work?

5. Implement: Once you've recognised what your patterns are, there are a number of strategies you can use to overcome them.

6. Review: It's important to review your progress, reflect on what's working and revise anything that isn't.

1. Recognise

Understanding the psychology behind your procrastination is the first essential step to overcoming it.

Next time you get the urge to put something off, ask yourself WHY? Be aware of your reasons, but you don't need to judge yourself!

Knowing your pattern when it comes to **assumptions** and **excuses** is particularly useful in challenging them. We'll come to this later.

2. Question

Consider these common unhelpful mental rules and assumptions that can lead to procrastination. Do you recognise any of these in yourself?

- ***I need to be in charge***
The control freak: I resent not being in control; I don't like the lack of independence or power.
- ***Life's too short***
The pleasure-seeker: Life should come first; if I work too much I'll become a boring drone.
- ***I'm too tired***
The napper: I need to be fully rested; I can't work when my energy is low.
- ***I can't do it***
The self-doubter: I am not good enough, it's too difficult; if I do this my inadequacies will show.
- ***If I don't try, I can't fail***
The fear of failure: I don't want to be judged poorly by others; it's better to do nothing than risk failing.
- ***It must be perfect***
The perfectionist: I can't do it perfectly so there's no point in doing it at all.

2. Question

In order to adjust these assumptions, you must question them.

Ask yourself the following:

- What is my unhelpful thought or assumption that I want to challenge?
- Where did this assumption come from?
- Is this assumption unfair, unrealistic or unhelpful?
- What are the negative consequences of this assumption?
- How can I approach this in a more positive way?

Let's look at a few examples.

2. Question example: the perfectionist

What is my rule or assumption that I want to challenge? I must do this perfectly; if I don't, others will judge me poorly.

Where did this assumption come from? Producing high-quality work in the past has raised others' expectations of me which I feel pressured to meet. I have had experience of being criticised for doing something poorly.

Is this assumption unfair, unrealistic or unhelpful? Perfection is impossible. Criticism and feedback can lead to improvement. Other people are not looking to judge me badly.

What are the negative consequences of this assumption? My expectations are paralysing so I do nothing. I see failure waiting around every corner and my mind is on constant high alert. Constant repetition ensures that this becomes an ingrained habit pattern of my mind, stopping me from achieving my full potential.

What is an alternative rule or assumption that is more helpful? I can tolerate criticism. Doing things imperfectly does not always lead to disapproval. I will do my best but accept that it does not need to be perfect.

2. Question example: the pleasure-seeker

What is my rule or assumption that I want to challenge? I should make the best of what life has to offer now.

Where did this assumption come from? I admire fun people, not boring drones. All work and no play will make me dull, dull, dull.

Is this assumption unfair, unrealistic or unhelpful? Not all achievers are boring, in fact they are usually interesting, not least because they are interested in what they do. Doing work when it needs to be done does not always mean denying myself the pleasures of life.

What are the negative consequences of this assumption? Opting for pleasure can become a habit that leaves no room for work.

What is an alternative rule or assumption that is more helpful? Finding the right balance can both nourish me by allowing me to enjoy life whilst allowing me to achieve my academic potential.

3. Tolerating discomfort

You have seen how the procrastination cycle feeds off emotional and physical discomfort, driving you to try and avoid the things you need to do. You cannot necessarily stop these negative thoughts from arising but you **can** change the way you **relate** to them.

By choosing to tolerate the 'negative' feelings we can learn that, in themselves, they are not necessarily distressing. They only become so when we judge the experience as a 'bad thing'.

It's also helpful to remember that feelings aren't permanent, and negative emotions can be helpful. For example, fear can prepare us for danger; anger can spur us into action. Simply acknowledging what you feel in the knowledge that, like all feelings, they will pass builds emotional resilience and strength.

**MORE ON
THIS AREA**



[The Counselling Service](#) run a range of workshops; the drop-in mindfulness sessions are particularly relevant for learning to tolerate discomfort. The relaxation sessions that run on Tuesdays would also help.

4. Challenge

We all make excuses. While the excuses may be valid, they often lead to unhelpful conclusions:

I'm really tired -> I should do it after resting

There's plenty of time -> I don't need to start work now

I work better under pressure -> I should leave it till the last minute

I don't want to do it now -> I'll wait until I have the motivation

I don't have enough time right now to complete this task -> I'll wait until I have a block of time sufficient to complete it

4. Challenge example – “I work better under pressure”

What is the conclusion you want to challenge?

I work better under pressure so it's best to leave it till the last minute.

What evidence or reasons do I have that it's better for me to put off this task?

Perhaps I do work better under pressure, but I always end up feeling disappointed and thinking 'I could have done better'.

What evidence or reasons do I have that it's better for me to start this task now?

When I have done some work, I feel better generally. I may end up with more time to improve my work and achieve my full potential.

Is it true that I will be better off in the long run delaying this task?

No, I get tired, frustrated, and stressed out and don't do justice to my true ability.

4. Challenge example – “*I work better under pressure*”

Is it true that I can't make even a small start on the task right now?

No. I could make a start now even though I may not be able to complete the task.

Is it true that later is a better time to do it?

Well, it may be, but how can I be sure that I'll feel any different? In fact, it's more likely that I'll feel more stressed and therefore less motivated.

If I make some start on the task right now – What might happen? How might I feel?

Chances are I'll feel better and want to carry on. Motivation comes from *doing*.

If I don't make a start on the task right now – What might happen? How might I feel?

Past experience suggests I'll feel worse and end up underperforming.

5. Strategise

There are a number of strategies you can use to help you to deal with procrastination. We examine these strategies in detail in [strategies for dealing with procrastination](#).



6. Review

When attempting a task it is important to review your progress. This includes praising yourself for things you have done well whilst always encouraging yourself to improve.

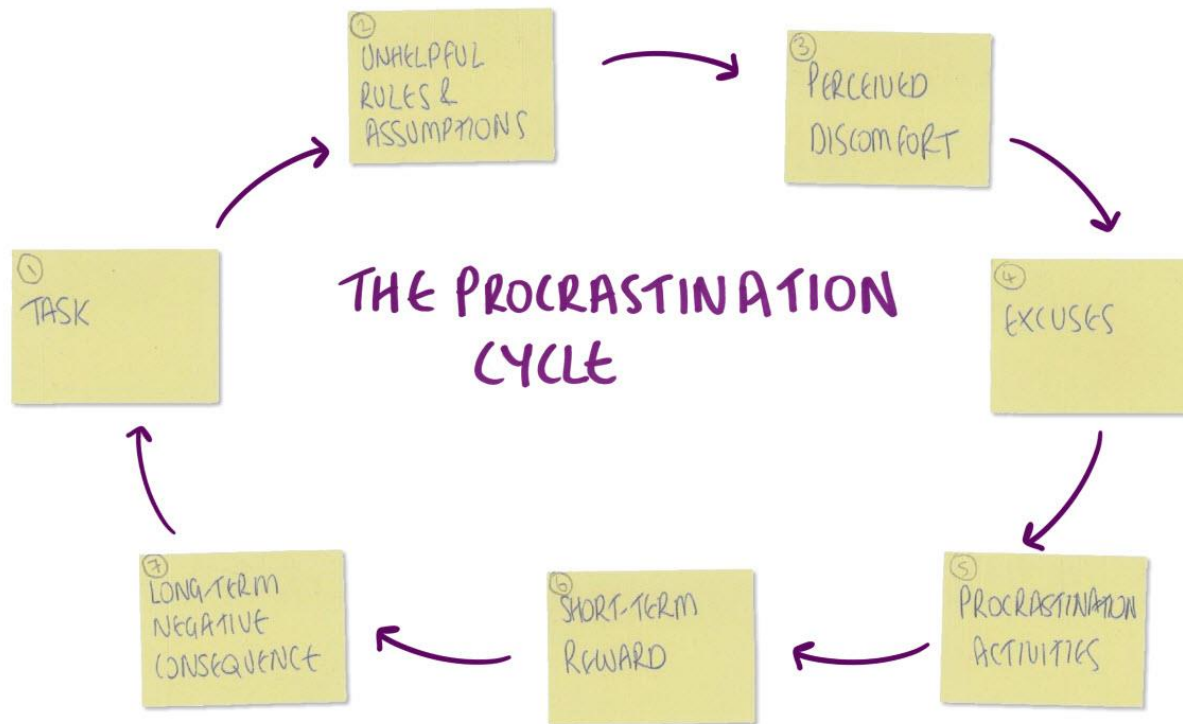
Go back over the strategies you've used to overcome procrastination and identify what has worked well and what hasn't.

Congratulate yourself for the things you've done well, even for the small wins. This will help you to keep motivated to continue.

For anything that hasn't worked as well, think about how you can adjust and improve your techniques.

Summary

You will now have a better understanding of your own procrastination pattern, and the negative and unhelpful thoughts, emotions and assumptions that propagate it.



By understanding these patterns, you're in a better position to question and challenge them, enabling you to regain control and start getting things done!



Useful links

Counselling Service website

