The Effect of Self-Talk on Procrastination

Karen Coltharp of Mount St. Mary's College of Newburgh, New York, describes procrastination in terms of Eric Berne’s (1966) concept of transactional analysis. Coltharp suggests that, as a time manager, you function in one of three modes: child, critic, or adult.

The child is the part of you that wants to have fun and have it now. When the child within you gains control, you avoid those tasks that seem dull, boring, or too difficult.

The voice of the critic causes you to doubt your abilities, goals, and self. The critic foretells failure at every turn. When a task seems difficult for you, this voice insists you don’t have the right background, experience, or intelligence to get the job done. With such encouragement, you find yourself procrastinating instead of meeting challenges head on.

The adult in you provides the voice of reason and logic. This voice knows that some tasks are no fun but must be accomplished anyway. The adult side of you then musters the internal motivation to begin dull and distasteful tasks and see them through. To do so, this voice must outtalk the critic: "Yes, this is difficult, but I’ve been successful before," "I lack experience in this particular area, but I have similar experiences upon which I can draw," "I don’t have the right background, but I can learn it," "Others have been successful and I can be, too."

The role in which you function affects the way you work and the ways in which you perceive problems. The child’s primary activity is lack of constructive, purposeful activity. Conversing with friends, partying, and other leisure activities prevent the child from ever getting to the business at hand. Worry is the critic’s chief activity. Instead of studying, the critic worries about studying. This includes such self-talk as "Can I learn this? What if I don’t? If I don’t, I may fail...What if I fail? What will I do then? What will other people think?" Problem solving is the adult’s strength. When the adult studies, the adult thinks, "What do I have to learn? What would be the best way to learn this? Am I learning it? If not, how can I rethink my understanding?"

Sometimes, procrastination is a tool you use in your adult role. Suppose you perceive a problem and decide to delay its solution. What seems to be simple procrastination is actually an informed decision. The difference is in the reason for procrastinating. If your reason for postponing something is sound and appropriate, it may be the best plan of action. For example, you may be considering dropping a course after the first month of class. You’ve regularly attended class. Your grades are good. However, your financial status shows that you need to increase your work hours. Logically, you decide you cannot do justice to the course and work more hours. What appears to be procrastination (taking the class next semester) is actually a logical decision based on the reality of the situation.

Source: Study Methods and Reading Techniques, Rhonda Atkinson and Debbie Longman, West Publishing.