

## [Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / The Science of Procrastination—and How to Really Get Stuff Done

You may find this hard to believe, but 60 songs that explain the 90s, America's favorite poorly named music podcast is back with 30 more songs than 120 songs total. I'm your host Rob Harvilla, here to bring you more shrewd musical analysis, poignant nostalgic reveries, crude personal anecdotes, and rad special guests, all with even less restraint than usual. Join us once more on 60 songs that explain the 90s every Wednesday on Spotify.

Today's episode is the first in a new mini series about getting stuff done, and this episode in particular

is about not getting stuff done. I consider myself an exceptional procrastinator. There are many times when I sit down at my computer to accomplish one task, say answer my email, write five paragraphs,

and I'll immediately, when I sit at my computer, get swept up in some text conversation, which will lead maybe to some snooping around ESPN, basketball reference, which will remind me, I should check

the Atlantic homepage where I'll open three articles and separate tabs, and those articles will berth even more tabs, but they're long articles, and I want to make some coffee as a companion, so maybe I should make some coffee, but I should listen to a podcast while I make coffee, right, while I do that. I might as well check Twitter while I'm listening to a show, and, you know, two hours later I've written absolutely nothing. When scientists initially studied this act of procrastination, they tended to focus on procrastination as a failure of time management. I've always struggled with that approach, like, yes, putting off something that you should be doing, pushing it later into the future, clearly that is a failure to manage your time in the here and now, but when I think about what it really feels like to delay an important task, I think it's more about mood than it is about time. The story that I'm telling myself in the moment of procrastination is, one, I'm in the wrong mood to do a good job on this big important thing, and two, maybe I'll be in a better mood later, right, it's if I make coffee now, I'll have deeper focus later. If I send a few tweets now, my fingers will be all warmed up, and I'll, you know, be able to write this article much faster. If I watch TV now, I'll have banked the necessary energy tokens that I can redeem for deep focus later on. These are the classic excuses of the procrastinator, maybe you recognized yourself in their reflection, and sometimes these excuses work, but often this approach creates what I've called in a previous article for the Atlantic, the procrastination doom loop. The procrastination doom loop that is putting off an important task makes you feel a little anxious, a little guilty, that anxiety and guilt makes you even less likely to be productive, which makes you less likely to begin the task in the first place, which makes you feel guilty, which makes you less productive and around and around we go.

As you can probably tell, I spent way too much time thinking about this, which is why it was such a pleasure to think out loud about it with an actual scientist. Tim Pitchell is a retired professor of psychology at Carleton University. He is a long, long time productivity researcher. And in this episode, we talk about the science of delay, the philosophy of procrastination,

and how to actually get stuff done. I'm Derek Thompson. This is Plain English.

Professor Tim Pitchell, welcome to the show.

Thanks, Derek. Nice to meet you.

Nice to meet you as well. So most people listening, and certainly I, I'm a procrastination expert by

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virtue of the fact that I'm an expert in doing the thing of procrastinating. You're an expert in procrastination by virtue of the fact that you study procrastination. And I'd first like to ask, how did you arrive at that research focus?

Well, I didn't do that as my graduate work. Back in the late 80s and early 90s, I was doing graduate work on goal pursuit. So I was very much interested in what we call personal projects or personal strivings, those sorts of the goals we have in our lives, and how they were unfolding. And so I was looking particularly with my own doctoral work to see if we could predict someone's well-being based on personality, which of course we know we can. But on top of that, what are the doings in our lives? If we think about personalities, the havings in our lives, the doings, our projects, would they account for some of the variants in our well-being? And lo and behold, what emerged both in the qualitative data and the quantitative data was that if your goals weren't going well, you weren't making progress, particularly if you were procrastinating, I could predict your well-being. And it was awful. And then I turned a corner. I remember my external examiner saying to me at the end of my defense, he said, so what's next, Tim? And I said, I'm going to stop studying what people are doing and start studying what people say they're going to do and never do because there's a huge story there. So that's where I got started. It was serendipity in that regard.

There is a saying that wisdom is the ability to follow through on our own advice. And I wonder whether you consider all failures to follow through on our advice procrastination. So for example, take the issue of diet. If somebody says, I don't want to eat dessert during the week in the year of 2023, I never want to have dessert during the week. But then the next Tuesday, they find themselves reaching into the freezer for Ben and Jerry's again. Now that's a failure to adhere to one's goals. And I suppose it's possible that the self-talk in that person's head is, well, next week I'll start this goal. Is all failure to adhere to one's goals best thought of as akin to or a kind of procrastination? Well, you're such a philosopher. One of my favorite philosophers, Sam Harris, is he's the most recent person to have said what you just said, you know, to wisdom is the ability to follow one's own goals. I don't think I could lump. That's a tough question. I don't think I've ever been asked that before. Would I consider all of those instances of procrastination? No, but I would consider all instances of procrastination an example of that. I think there's other ways that we can work against our own best interests. The Greeks called it a crazia, right? Doing something that's actually not in our best interest. But I think procrastination, you have to have an intention first of all, and just having an idea that I shouldn't eat such and such anymore, that doesn't mean you actually made an intention. And so I want to keep procrastination quite deliberately defined or narrowly defined, as we did in research to say it's the voluntary delay of an intended action, despite expecting to be worse off of the delay. So I think it's really important to do that because otherwise everything gets included, every form of delay gets included under procrastination, and then it collapses under its own definitional weight. I want to start with a research project that you did three decades ago in the 1990s, which in other interviews you've described as an inflection point in your career. You gave students pagers and journals, and you pinged them to ask them about their emotional state. Tell me about this study. Yeah. Well, Derek, I'm so pleased you're going back to that because you're a young guy. And I don't know how old you were when I was doing this study.

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I was very much around the 1990s. I'll say that. Yes. Okay. Well, it was really unique on our campus at that time. Nowadays, of course, these experience sampling studies are very easy to do because everyone's running around with phones, and the software has become quite sophisticated. But I actually had to buy these little pagers, and for listeners that don't even know what I'm talking about, you'll see them in older doctor shows. They're just a little clip-on device that actually vibrated that would either tell you to call a number, or in our case, it just vibrated. And at that point, as you said, the participants each had a small binder, and they'd opened that binder, and they were asked a bunch of questions. What are you doing? Hanging out in the coffee shop with my friends. So let's appraise that now. Now they didn't say it exactly like that. How much fun is that? How difficult? How stressful? How are you feeling? Is there something else you should be doing? Oh, yeah. What's that? Oh, I'm supposed to be doing my stats assignment. So then the same ratings, right? How difficult, how stressful, how enjoyable. And we also, we did a series of studies like this, and then a different study than that one, we actually asked people, what are you thinking about? And I'll come back to that too, because you started with feelings. Now the interesting thing is we did this experience sampling about four times a day over a period of a week. And if I just summarize it, I'll say on Monday, we got that typical yes, I should be doing my stats assignment, let's move to Thursday night, what are you doing? I'm doing my stats assignment. Oh, this is a moment of truth. How difficult is it? How stressful, how enjoyable. Now this didn't turn in to be the most fun thing that everyone was doing that week, but it wasn't as difficult. It wasn't as stressful, and it was more enjoyable than they anticipated. Statistically significantly different. Again, acknowledging that it was no way fun. And people didn't go, this is, I'm so glad I'm doing this right now. But to go back to that student who did a study where she asked, what are you thinking? Early in the week on Monday, students were saying things like, I'll feel more like it tomorrow. Oh, there's lots of time left on my favorite. I work better under pressure. Now on Thursday night, no one spontaneously said, oh, I'm so glad I waited till now because I work so much better under pressure. Instead, we got people saying things like, why didn't I get started earlier? I could do such a better job if I had. And this isn't as bad as I thought it would be. So yeah, as you're right, it was kind of a watershed moment because from that came one of my first personal mantras, which is just get started. And we can come back that half you want because it's problematic in its own way, but it is key to defeating procrastination, not recognizing that getting started is everything. What I took from that study is that people often overrate the difficulty of the tasks that they're procrastinating on, and they overrate how good task avoidance will make them feel in the future. So there's this double overrating. What I love about your research generally is that when I first started writing about procrastination, I was writing about it as an economics journalist from the Atlantic. And in economics, you write about procrastination as a hyperbolic discounting, which is basically this really like fusty idea of underrating future benefits more than you actually should. But what I really love about your work is that you don't look at procrastination like we're all Homo economists and we're all sort of like perfectly rational beings. You look at procrastination as emotional regulation. Like when I think about my own frame of mind when I'm putting off a task, the self-talk in my head, what I am actually telling myself is I'll be better suited to this later. My emotional fit for this task will be better later. I'll be in the right frame of mind to do this later. I believe this sort of reflection

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is called effective forecasting. Tim, are we good at effective forecasting?

Okay, so affect for listeners is a broad umbrella term that encompasses things like emotions and feelings. So it's just a psychological jargon, affect. So affective forecasting is predicting how we're going to feel in the future. And just like predicting the weather and predicting economics, we're not very good at it. In fact, Dan Gilbert at Harvard and Timothy Wilson at University of Virginia, landmark research in the area. But I should step back and say that when you said we're not Homo economists, no, we're not. And if we take the example of the Nobel Laureate

in 2017 from the University of Chicago, Richard Taylor. Okay, so behavioral economist, he told us, he taught us that we're not as rational as we think. And I love his expression. I was listening to him on television one day, because I'd never met him personally. And he was saying, you know, we're more like Homer Simpson than we are Homo economicus. So I just love the fact that

you picked up, but we're not. We're not rational. So when we do this affective forecasting, going to predict how we're going to feel tomorrow. It's a human tendency to focus on just one or two things typically just over focus on one thing. And it leads us to forget that other things are going to change other things are going to influence us. And so that had a big impact on the way I thought about procrastination. Because if I, if I put something off, like so I'm facing something that's difficult. And as you said, I've already blown it out of proportion. Oh, this is horrible. I hate this. And this is so much more fun. The other part of it, which I didn't get into and when we'll come back to, but right now I'm going to focus on the fact I hate this. I don't want to do it. And I give it up. I say, I'm not going to do it today. I'm going to put it off till tomorrow. Future self is going to want to feel more like doing it. Well, what happens to me at that point is I feel good. I got the monkey off my back. And now I make the fatal mistake because I'm more like Homer Simpson than Homo economicus of saying, how am I going

to feel tomorrow? Well, we rely on how we're feeling now. It's that form of focalism, but it's called presentism. I'm relying on the present. So I rely on my present state. I feel good.

So when I make that intention update and say, no, I'm going to do this tomorrow, I don't think about how I feel horrible about it now. I'm going to feel the same way tomorrow. I feel good now. I'm going to feel good tomorrow. And so you're absolutely right.

We're not very good at affective forecasting. Many years ago, I wrote about the dangers of what I called the procrastination doom loop, which very much picks up on your idea of affective forecasting and the ways in which we're bad at anticipating our future emotional mindsets.

And in the procrastination doom loop, it starts like this. We think in step one, that putting off an important task is useful, but then it makes us feel anxious or guilty or even ashamed. And then step three, that anxiety and guilt and shame makes us less likely to have the emotional and cognitive energy to be more productive later on. And that makes us even less likely to begin the task in the first place. And then that makes us feel more guilty.

And then that makes us less productive in a round and around we go, we get stuck in this loop of putting off the necessary work, feeling guilty about it. And then that makes us put it off even more. This was my own just term that I made up procrastination doom loop, putting a scientist sort of mind on it. What am I talking about here? You mentioned the word focalism. I don't

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know exactly what that is. What would you say I am experiencing when I'm going through one of these

procrastination doom loops? Okay, I'm going to back it up a bit. I really love it.

By the way, I think it describes procrastination very well. And a few moments ago, you talked about hyperbolic discounting. And the other notion there is utility. And of course, for a long time, I've said, Jesus, it's not a notion of utility in the way most of us think about utility. We recognize it. This isn't the highest utility. Getting this other task done is really the highest utility. I just don't want to do it. But let's put that aside for a second. I can go back to the doom loop. I would say that what's happened right at the beginning, something you didn't acknowledge explicitly, because you said you're justifying the delay because you say it's actually a good idea. Well, what's happening at that very moment, I would argue, is cognitive dissonance. You are using those thoughts to reduce the dissonance you're feeling, between the fact that you had this intention to do something, but you're not going to do it. And the behavior is different than the intention. And so there's that tension between it, that what we call a festinger call it cognitive dissonance. And we need to reduce it. So you did it by rationalizing it. And the reason I would go there is because one of the things in early research with dissonance was they came up with a dissonance thermometer and really how much guilt you're experiencing. And right away, you said, yeah, and you start experiencing this guilt. And if you've done it a few times, if you recognize as a pattern, it might even go into shame because you recognize like, what's wrong with me? It's not it's not the task anymore. It's something about myself. And so not only is it a doom loop, I would argue it's a downward spiral, because you're now caught up in these negative feelings. Now, you said that you liked my focus on the research, because I didn't focus on utility and discounting, although I don't poo poo that we do discount future rewards, there's no doubt about that cognitively. But the process I'm more interested in is the emotional process here, that now you're absolutely right. With all that guilt you're feeling, you've got these more buildup of negative emotions. So in fact, now you want to avoid even more, because what is procrastination? It's an avoidant coping strategy. What are we trying to cope with? Negative feelings.

I didn't like the task. I found it boring, or I was resenting it, or I found it frustrating.

We're at a lot of anxiety. I'm trying to deal with that by avoidance. And now I've got guilt on top of it. In fact, back in 2010, we did a study showing that self forgiveness could help us with that. But I love your doom loop. It captures it really, really well. And I think what's at heart there is that you started with reducing cognitive dissonance. It didn't work, right? Because we know that this is going to come back and bite me. And future self screaming at you, quit doing this to me. Future self doesn't want to do this. I want listeners to know that we are in the phase right now of diagnosis and certainly self disclosure. We are getting to the phase of prescription in just a second, but just a little bit more in diagnosis. When I think, because when I when I booked you for this interview, I'm in the middle of book leave right now. And as I know you know, book leave is an extraordinarily perfect time to feel all sorts of shame and anxiety about procrastination. Very, very easy to feel aversion toward a writing assignment that is tens of thousands of words long. So I've had an interesting opportunity in the last few days to be really mindful about my procrastination, as bizarre as that sounds, to really think as I'm procrastinating.

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And sorry, Ezra, my co-author, if you're listening to this about all my procrastination, to really be mindful about what am I thinking right now? What is actually going through my mind as I'm putting off writing this chapter? And this might be related to what you called focalism, but I'm not entirely sure. There are sometimes where I know that I need to finish a passage of writing. And I'll tell myself, before I start on this project, I'm going to finish one little other assignment. I'm just going to answer my email, and then I'll start writing. I'm just going to clean that little spot out the kitchen over there for the 17th time, in the last hour and a half. I'm just going to do this one thing. And I put so much focus in my mind on the accomplishment of that one last barrier before I get started with the actual work itself. My best friend, Drew Durbin, sometimes describes this as procrastinating down. It's as if I have a list of seven things that might be somewhat useful to do. And rather than get thing A done, I'll find time to get things B, C, D, E, F done in order to delay the amount of time to do A. So is this mindset, this idea of holding up one last thing, one last barrier, before I get started with work, and constantly coming up with excuses to find one other thing to be the last barrier? Is there a word for that? Is there a science behind my compelling neurosis? You're not neurotic. You're really insightful. There's two things going on I would like to address. And there's probably more, but I'll start with two. The first is, I don't know if you're familiar with a retired emeritus professor from Stanford by the name of John Perry. And if you're not, you'll want to read his book, *The Art of Procrastination*. That's just the first part of the title, *The Art of Procrastination*. He's got the most visited essay on procrastination on the internet called *Structured Procrastination*. And he would argue in some ways, you could be even a chronic procrastinator, as he argues he is, but he's a structured procrastinator, and it had a flavor of that in there. You've got your list, and you're avoiding the thing at the top of the list, and you're getting all this other stuff done. Now, the slight difference is that you're on book leave, so you really, what he puts at the top of his list, is something that seems important and urgent, but isn't. And he says, that's really important, because otherwise you're going to hurt yourself. But he said, it takes a little bit of self-deception, but don't worry procrastinators are great as self-deception. So if you described it just that way, I'd say, gee, that makes sense, right? You're harnessing avoidance motivation to get a bunch of other things done. So that's how some people listening to you might have seen it, but you shouldn't be avoiding this at all. What flagged for me is another thing that we do with procrastination. Back in the 1980s, a couple of authors named Silver and Sabini wrote a beautiful essay called *Just Procrastination*, and they say, or they said, we make rational decisions over irrationally short periods of time. So you've got this desire to avoid this big task, because it has negative emotions, but you're not willing to let it go, because you know, in my heart of hearts, I can't just procrastinate today. But you say, you know, it'll only take me a minute to do this other thing. But we make, and it's true, probably would. But a minute later, you're facing the same decision.

And so you find yourself doing one task after another, and not getting back to the thing that you want to be doing, or that you know you ought, that's probably the better way to think, because want is a funny word in that sentence, that you ought to be doing. So whenever I hear, and I heard it so clearly in your voice, whenever I hear myself thinking, it will only take a minute, I say, Tim, you're on the slippery slope of procrastination here, because this wasn't your

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priority. And the only reason you want to do this right now is to avoid the hard task at hand. Now, the last little twist I'd give to that is that I know a lot of accomplished people who've attended workshops with me and say, you know, Tim, I finally get to that work, but I'd kind of warm up by doing a few easy tasks. So I'm telling listeners, if you do that, and that's a strategy, and you always do the main task, and you leave yourself enough room, so be it, right? There's not one shoe fits all here. But I think we always have to be wary of where we really are, just it's a whole day of avoidance. I can remember once I was walking across campus, one of my colleagues

said, Tim, I know what you study. Can you tell me what's wrong with me, please? I came to campus at

seven o'clock in the morning. I had one thing I really needed to get done. I've done a million things today, but I haven't touched that, right? And it's kind of where that has a flavor to. So I hope in those three stories, it's sort of answered your what you wanted to have analyzed, but it's helped listeners think about all the nuances in there. I do feel effectively analyzed, effectively analyzed, and effectively analyzed. I just thought somewhat cheekily, if there is some function, according to this theory of structural procrastination, whereby getting projects B through F done quickly is accelerated by an aversive project A. What I should really do is ask my wife to tell me to redo our entire backyard garden, because I really don't want to do that.

And maybe I'll procrastinate on the gardening assignment by writing my book.

Isn't that the truth? I will turn, like the project A that I'm currently procrastinating on will be the excuse I have to procrastinate on a new project A, which is this even more aversive assignment. I mean, I'm kind of joking here, but is there a sort of disease psychology by which this sort of might make sense that giving ourselves even more aversive assignments accelerates the work of assignments to which we are currently averse? You're not joking at all. And I think we see it play out in our lives. The only thing I get hooked on is when you say, I give myself, as we get to the point where we're actually doing it on purpose, the facade is gone, and it's not as powerful. But I'll tell you that every day we look at our projects, and that's going on non-consciously at the very least, where you're doing this aversiveness rating. And the ones that you really want to avoid, the one you were avoiding yesterday, now you're anxious to do because there's another one that's worse.

Right. What do you do? I need to get Devin to call Laura to tell her to force me to do this gardening assignment, and then my productivity will go off the charts. Very last point before we get to prescriptions, because I am really eager to talk about both the strategies that don't work and are popular, and the strategies that do work. When I was reporting a piece years and years ago, I came across research from the psychologist Mihai Sheiksen Mihai, which I think that's how you pronounce his name, sort of, but it's an impossible name to pronounce. And he had a study that was very similar to your pagers in journal studies that he called the paradox of work, which is that when people are not working, when they're in leisure time and not in flow, his famous concept of flow,

when they're in anxious, awaiting leisure time, thinking about work they're not doing, they overrate how much they don't want to work, how much work is going to be miserable for them. But then if you ping them while they're actually working, they are surprisingly non-anxious. They're surprisingly okay with the process of working itself. And I wonder,

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I don't know if this is, I hope this question makes sense, what is it about aversive tasks that makes them aversive? I'm sorry if that's sort of teleological, but what are the sort of features of tasks that we procrastinate on? What do they have in common that they're working this magic on us that's causing us to avoid them? You asked a really good question. That's a tough question too. We asked a similar question not long after that study is in the 90s, in the late 90s. Alan Blunt, who was studying with me then, said, we talk about aversive tasks all the time, but what is aversive to one person isn't necessarily the same as what's aversive to the next? And that's not exactly where you're going, because you asked what makes them aversive, right? And why

when you looked at Mihaly's Sense of Purpose study, did we find much like in that study, we summarized before that when we actually get down to it, it's not nearly as bad as we think. I'm actually not going to touch that one. I'm going to talk more about, so what makes something aversive? And what we found in a study was that tasks that were boring, frustrating, or we resent doing were aversive, tasks that we had fear around or anxiety, tasks that lacked meaning and or structure. So there was no personal meaning. And it actually varied, which is interesting to us over the lifespan of a project. So if you think about the temporal nature of our lives, you know, some projects are just in the initiation stage where you're thinking, you know, I think I'll write a book. But now you're not there. You're in the action phase. You're not even in the planning phase anymore. So there's initiation, planning, action, and closure. And the nature of aversiveness changed over time. So in the initiation stage, if something lacked meaning, it was aversive. When it's at your stage, it's not about meaning anymore. It's about manageability. How am I going to do this? Right? And you've actually come up with some fun strategies to try to light a fire under your butt to keep you going that way. So aversiveness has some common flavors. Anything that you and I find boring or frustrating or resent or causes anxiety, that will always be something we'll want to avoid. But at other times, it depends on a dance between meaning and manageability. Meaning at the beginning of a project, manageability when we're deep into it. How do I keep myself on task? Because I know that it's meaningful. I know I want to write this book. Yeah. The last thing I would add is that when I think about what's most aversive to me is this mismatch between the product I want to accomplish and the time that I have to accomplish it. So when I tell myself something like, in the next hour and a half, I want to make progress on this book, well, I'm obviously not going to write the book in the next 90 minutes. That is physically impossible. And so it becomes aversive to fit this 90,000 word project into a 90 minute time span. Whereas if I tell myself, I want to write one paragraph in the next hour. I want to write one really good paragraph the next hour. I mean, that is a layup with no defense. That's much easier to do. I'm making the next hour

and a half beginner level to me. And that makes it easier to literally begin. And so to me is one thing that I figured out about my own aversiveness, my own procrastination is sort of miniaturized, miniaturized, miniaturized, the smaller I can make the next step, the more likely I am to actually take it. Yes. There was a paper published in Psychological Science, I think it was in 2008, that showed that if we think about things concretely, and this is actually a study relating how we construe projects and procrastination specifically, and if we construe things concretely, they have a sense of urgency to them, they belong to today. And we



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think about them abstractly, or another way of think about anemic intentions, like I have to work on my book for the next hour and a half, it's too vague to mean anything, it's anemic. But if you think about things concretely, they have that sense of urgency to them. So that's another way we talked about biases before, in terms of affective forecasting. This is another common human bias, that if we think about things concretely, the way the mind works is that they belong to today. So it actually is in that sense of going back to Richard Taylor and his famous book Nudge, by just using that technique, by making it very specific, you're nudging yourself in that direction, because that's just the way our brains happen to work. But I absolutely agree, the other powerful thing there is you're setting a goal that makes sense for the time period, I'm going to write a paragraph. And you can exceed that if you want, it's like anybody that we always like to under-promise and over-deliver, as opposed to the opposite. So all those things are happening, you really understand this inside and out. Well, I've lived this. It's like describing what my bedroom looks like, describing my mindset when I'm procrastinating. I do love the phrase anemic intentions, I think that's pretty emotionally redolent for me. All right, let's get to prescriptions. I want to talk first about common procrastination strategies that don't work before we talk about what does work. Sometimes I'll try to kickstart my productivity by setting early deadlines for projects. So for example, if I have to finish some writing by 3pm, I'll write down in my notebook, which I use as my calendar, I'll say finish by noon. But what always happens when I do this is suddenly it's 1130, and I look at my calendar and realize I have to accomplish this thing by noon. And I think I don't actually have to accomplish this by noon. I actually have until 3pm. And so I've given myself a false deadline, which ironically makes me less likely to accomplish the task, which again, kickstarts the doom loop. I feel bad about not having done what I said I do, and so I'm less likely to do it in the following three hours. Is there a name for this sort of false hope of kickstarting productivity by setting false deadlines for oneself that then makes it less likely you get the thing done at all? Well, that's the first time I've ever heard that last part added to it. I've heard some people in self-help books say things like that, set yourself an earlier deadline, and I always kind of scoff, I think. If you know it's not real, you're never going to live up to it. And I think it has to do a lot with the fact that when we use avoidance, a great deal in our lives to cope, and we say that procrastination becomes a habit, we move from guilt to shame. And so I think all of that internal stuff there is just shame grabbing you and saying, what the heck is wrong with me? Here I go again. I've tried to trick myself into getting this done, but pathetically, and that's the word I thought of, there's a certain level of pathos in that I can't make myself do this. No, not with things that are that bald face, because you know what you're doing to yourself. I think you're better, as we talked about a moment ago, to nudge yourself in that direction. So that's why I don't think that works. It's just too in your face. I'm trying to deal with, quote, my problem, and thinking about my problem just makes me feel badly about myself. And then you go down the doom loop.

What are other common strategies to reduce procrastination, at least common to people that you've observed, that you don't think work very well?

Time management. Time management is necessary, but not sufficient. Like I am a crazy time manager. If you look at my calendar, every 15 minutes is accounted for in my day every day for

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decades, right? In fact, there's a limit, hard limit in my calendar that I didn't know about to 50,000 events, which I run into. And now I have to delete things. I know. And I've told, I was on the phone with Apple just the other day saying, you know, this is equivalent to me ripping pages out of my family photo album. Like, you don't understand. Like this is my life I'm tearing up here. You're saying I can't have more than 50,000 events. But I, because I put in everything, I do it proactively as I plan, retroactively as I see, had to make intention updates. And I can hold myself accountable. I can do a forensic audit because everything's in color. And I can say, how did Tim spend his week? Where's the recreation in there, Tim? Did you do much writing? It's a wonderful thing when you do color too, because it just jumps out at you. You should put your writing in bright green or something or bright orange. So time management is necessary, but not sufficient because of course you can put in there deep work, right? You know, this time blocking notion that most people talk about and I use all the time, and you get to it and your whole body screams, I don't want to, I don't feel like it, I'll feel like more like it tomorrow. And that's a terrible procrastinator song. So time management doesn't fix the procrastinator. It's necessary, I think, to be effective. But that doesn't fix you. So then people say, well, I'll do the Pomodoro technique. I'll put a timer up. And usually there's a honeymoon effect with that. So if you did that for your next writing session, that might work. But I've never seen it last very long. It basically extinguishes to use an old behavioral term. After a while, you kind of see it for what it is. That's just a clock. I don't have to live up to that, right? And so I don't think that works very well in the long run. So those are two that I think are pretty ineffective, yet very popular. Now that we've covered what kind of goal setting doesn't work, help us think through what does work. And you can start with goal setting, you can start with emotional management, start wherever you think is most profitable. Well, let's start with goal setting, because to procrastinate, first means you have to have an intention. So when you make an intention, I would lean on a concept that Peter Galwitzer created many years ago now. Peter Galwitzer is at the University of New York. He's done decades of research on this. It's called an implementation intention. You have a goal intention right now, and that's to finish this book 90,000 words by the sounds of it. But an implementation intention starts to taste and feel like what you talked about when you had 90 minutes. In situation X, I'm going to do behavior Y. When I finish the interview with Tim, I'm going to spend an hour writing a paragraph. There, it's very concrete. In situation X, I'm going to do behavior Y. And the reason it's powerful is it puts the cue for the action into the environment. And then I don't have to rely on my internal cues anymore. I think, oh, yeah, that's my cue to do something. And I keep it really focused on what I'm going to do. So now I've set a more powerful intention. It's not anemic anymore. I hold myself accountable. So if I want to set another good intention, Devin is right here in the background with us. You can tell Devin what your intention is. Right now, you've made yourself accountable to her. Another thing you can do is protect yourself from all those things that distract you. So my phone is in airplane mode now for obvious reasons. We don't want to be interrupted. But my phone should be somewhere else when I'm trying to work. I don't know anybody who's not addicted to their phone. Even the oldest people I know now, we're just always staring at it. So we got to get rid of the things. I like to say preempt, that which tempts. It might not just be your phone. Get rid of it. So all those things, you're setting yourself up for success.

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But you're absolutely right when you say, I can go to a motion regulation because you know, from hearing some of that stuff that I've put up there for waking up, that I believe that the key thing is a motion regulation. So the moment that you've, so you have a task in front of you, then you've set a good intention. It's an implementation intention, but there's still a PC that just wants to run away. Well, the first thing you want to do is just breathe and calm down, like literally breathe deeply a few times and calm down, kick in your parasympathetic nervous system. Because what's happening at the physiological level is something we've, not just me, by any certain imagination, it's been nicknamed the amygdala hijack. That emotional brain is now running the ship to mix too many metaphors here, running the ship. It's taken over your brain. And now your prefrontal cortex, which is the planful part, the part that can inhibit impulsive actions, is just shut down because the amygdala is in control. So you take a few deep breaths and now you're starting to disengage that control. In a sense now, what we've done is we physiologically calm down a little bit, because sometimes just forget that, like we're really wired up tight. And now I can be more aware and I can be less reactive. But the fact is the emotions now might just be there. And I think it's really crucial to allow those emotions to recognize, I'm actually really anxious about what I have to write today. I know it sounded like a good idea, but I don't know how to articulate it. So we're going to stick with your writing, right? Because there are times when you think you know what you're going to say and you realize that it doesn't even make sense when I try to write this down. So now we're starting to become anxious or worried. And one of my favorite expressions comes from Joseph Goldstein, a mindfulness teacher, well known for his mindfulness teaching. And he'll say, it's okay to feel this way. And that's really powerful. Like you have to accept, at this point, your common humanity that, yeah, you're writing. If writing was easy, everybody would have a book. And you don't want to write a book, you want to write a good book. And that puts the stakes up higher. And of course, you're going to feel this way. It's okay to feel this way. And then another powerful statement that comes to me in terms of this comes from Parker Palmer. And he says, I can have fear. I need not be my fear if I'm willing to stand within some place else of my inner landscape. See, those things are powerful things for me when I'm trying to cope with procrastination, because I have to deal with the fact that I'm having all these aversive emotions and thoughts. My mind's going to think and feel it's on a tear. And in fact, it's on a habitual tear, because if you've got a procrastination habit, well, is it ever good at it? You get into those ruts, right? And you have to derail that and say, I can feel this way. It's okay. It's human nature to feel this way. There's other parts of my inner landscape in which to stand. My desire to succeed, my curiosity, the fact that I know I've done this before. And then I can get down to the task. So that that is the emotion regulation process without getting in any further about, you know, starting to analyze our emotions. We don't even need to do that. Because then I can ask that the last thing before we go back to your questions, Derek, is the last thing is this for me. And this is where I make a little twist from the classic mindfulness focus is remember, I said at the very beginning of the interview, I said, out of that 1990 study came the notion of let's get just get started, not just do it. That's the Nike slogan. It's just get started. Now, years ago, because my stuff's out there in the world, someone wrote to me and said, Dr. Mitchell, thank you so much for doing your research. But you know, sir,

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if I could just get started, I wouldn't have a procrastination problem. Can you do a little better than that, please? So I went to David Allen, the guru on productivity, because he's got some words of wisdom here. And he says, you know, we don't do projects, we do actions. So I follow up all that emotion regulation bit by doing something you've said inherently already. What's the next action, right? And you keep it small, and you keep it that nice little step that anybody could do. And of course, now I've calmed myself now down enough to do it. And now I'm not procrastinating. I'm making that step. So there, to me, I think we've captured the essence of how to solve the procrastination puzzle. That's really beautiful. I have two follow up questions. The first is about the discrepancy between a kind of emotional approach to fixing procrastination and what you might call a more behavioral approach to fixing procrastination. And you might see these as two different strategies that can live alongside each other. So one of them is the kind of mindfulness that you're describing. I feel averse to a task. My amygdala gets hijacked. I start to feel anxious about the thing that I should be doing. And so my mind starts flying off to all these other things that can occupy my time. You're saying, breathe deeply, identify the thought. And in the identification of the thought, the solution to it will live in there. You'll see that it's just a thought. You don't have to identify with it. And you can move on to accomplishing that, which you actually want to accomplish. It seems like there's another strategy that's more purely behavioralist, which is to say, we're surrounded by distractions. I mean, way more so when you started your research, the 1990s, way more so than you, when you published your first book on procrastination. There are so many opportunities to draw our attention away from our work that if we are more deliberate about eliminating those distractions and just confronting a computer that only has the Notes app accessible to us, that that might be its own solution. So I guess here you have, there's an emotional project, which is being reflective on our own thinking. There's a behavioral solution, which is eliminating all these distractions. Do you think of these as things that people should or can do side by side is one more important than the other, according to your research? I think they have to dance together. And you're absolutely right, there are more distractions. But I wrote my doctorate dissertation in a cabin in the woods with my dog team. You can't see it if I put my camera up, but you'd see my dog sled. For 23 years, I ran a team of dogs. And I just couldn't write at my back at my home or on campus. And so I literally dog sledded into this cabin. I'd get up in the morning, I'd write until noon, I'd run the dogs for an hour or two, I'd write until dark, and I'd run the dogs again. And I kept it that simple. And so that's very helpful to get rid of distractions. And that's why I said, not only should we use implementation intentions, but we need to preempt that which tempts, right? But even once you've preempted that which tempts, you sit in front of a blank screen and see if you can escape yourself. You're not. In fact, that blank screen could be terrifying. And at that point, if you're not ready with some emotion regulation skills, all you've done is isolated yourself. You're not going to be effective as a writer. And you know, you have to be ready to have other strategies in there too, much more than we probably have time for, but you have to celebrate your successes. You talked about the fact that it's 90,000 words. My dissertation was very long as well. And so I'd have to celebrate that I wrote some today. And at the same time, I'd have to grieve and I'd have to cry into my lead dog's collar, which I did some nights just saying, I don't know if I can do this Bernie, right? Like, this is really hard. So the whole person has to show up. And so I don't

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separate them. I do think you're absolutely right. Behavioral strategies like getting rid of those distractions are crucial, but they're never going to get you away from yourself. And so you better be ready to deal with that. My second question, and this might be a useful place to wrap up, is it seems to me that there's some parts of Buddhism and even Western self-help philosophy that tells us that the key to happiness is being in the present. But sometimes in procrastination, we are all too much in the present moment. We are too plunged into the instant rewards of the present. And that when I don't want to finish a piece of writing, I am plunged into a text conversation about what's happening in the NBA playoffs, or I go into Slack in order to gossip with some of my fellow journalists. In a way, I am escaping into the present to get away from the potential murky, anemic, as you call them, future rewards to which I have tried to anchor myself. So I wonder how you feel about that apparent paradox, which might not be a paradox, or might just be a paradox we have to live with, which is that on the one hand, we're told that the key to happiness is this ability to be with ourselves in the moment, but that also a lot of procrastination is escaping from our duty or our work in order to be so very much in the moment. Yes, but I think that's a little bit of a misrepresentation of what it means to be in the present from a Buddhist perspective. I'm not a Buddhist, and I want to be careful not to try to interpret these things, but to be present, I would argue that to be present means I can be aware of the fact that I want to escape. That has the essence of I'm being present. You're absolutely right that on the surface of it, it would seem that, well, procrastination is living in the moment, *carpe diem*, *sees the day*, *drink and be merry*, but the other side of it is *make hay while the sun shines*. The thing here in your example is that I don't see procrastination as living in the present moment. It's escaping, as you say. It's escaping that present moment. The present moment was I was on task, and now I don't want to be on task anymore. Even if I just seek out a friend and cry the blues about what I don't feel like doing, I'm not really living in the moment now. I'm talking about what that moment could be like. That's the best I can do with that, but I just think that it doesn't mean exactly the way you're presenting it. The last notion, this idea though, a paradox is an interesting thing in the world, that we can have one great truth, and the opposite of it is often another great truth. But I would never try to say that procrastination is an example of me really living in the moment because I'm putting off that task that I don't want to do. No, because the definition, again, as I said, we have to live with, it's the voluntary delay of an intended action despite expecting to be worse off at the delay. There's an inherent irrationality to it. And if I think I'm going to be worse off for this delay, it's not living in the moment to run away from it. Yeah, that's really lovely. I think there's something pretty profound about the idea that, and I should be clear, I'm not a Buddhist either. And so that might explain to the many Buddhist listeners why I might have done such a junky job of explaining the philosophy. I don't think you do a junky job at anything, but yeah, go ahead. But I do think there's something interesting about this idea that you're right. There is something about procrastination that's very layered. You are conducting one activity under the shadow of the thing that you should be doing. And there's a big, big difference between, say, playing a board game with friends or neighbors that you are thoroughly enjoying at the end of a workday when you got something done. And the playing of that board game, the exact same behaviors, but they're all happening under the shadow of this kind of guilt or nagging worry

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that you didn't get what you wanted done and you should have gotten it done. And in fact, this playing of the board game is yet more delay of the thing that you should have gotten done, that that shadowing actually is the definition of procrastination.

Yeah, and it's the stewing in our own juices that I think makes people so sad. And they think, why do I keep doing this to myself? And it's because we're lacking this awareness of how we're going to face the things inside of us that we think are intolerable. And in fact, if we go back to that process of emotion regulation, first calming down, then being allowing the emotions, and then as you said really clearly, and we just jumped over it, which is non identification with the emotion. But then the next step in the emotion regulation program is to recognize that these things are temporary and tolerable. Yeah, I'm overwhelmed right now. But you know, if I just let it be, it's going to disappear because everything that has the nature to arise will also leave, right? So it'll also disappear. And these feelings will thoughts come and go feelings come and go. But if you want to stew on it, then it'll stay because if you just you keep feeding it, and that's that wonderful notion of the one you feed, if you keep feeding it, it'll stay around. But we don't have to. But you've captured so well, I think, the pathos, the sadness, the downward spiral of when we don't let go and get on with the things that matter to us. And in that sense, it's deeply existential. Because I think part of us recognizes, I'm not even living the life that I want to live here. Like you feel fraudulent. And you know, you recognize that this is not who I want to be. And so it's not a simple thing at all. It's not like when my book was submitted two weeks late, right? Most of us would consider that a big problem. It's the inner turmoil creates about who we are. Yeah. Professor Tim Penchell, thank you so much. I love the way that you think about this in a really, in a really big and profound way. And it was really a pleasure to talk to you. Thanks. Pleasure to talk with you too. I really enjoy your insights.

Plain English was hosted and reported by me, Derek Thompson, and produced by Devon Manzi. We'll see you back here every Tuesday for a brand new episode. Have a great week.