

# Why We Procrastinate

By [Liya Panayotova](#) | March 24, 2017 | 2:30pm

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Last minute taskers rejoice: psychological research proves that procrastinators are not necessarily lazy. Often, they are people who fear failure and rejection but don't know the right strategies to reveal and conquer that fear.

Oh. Well that's not much better than "lazy," but at least we have a legitimate excuse.

One of the more obvious reasons why people procrastinate is to avoid doing something unpleasant. However, this is actually not as simple as it may sound. While some tasks are the embodiment of boredom, others may lead to procrastination because they scare you, on a subconscious level. Psychologists call this contributing factor to procrastination "fear of failure" and outline a few important dimensions. As a result, we can see that procrastination is not necessarily the product of laziness or lack of motivation. Deciphering the fear that lurks at the back of your mind is what really counts.

According to one of the most popular therapeutic approaches, called cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), [we all have certain basic assumptions about ourselves](#), either positive or negative, known as core beliefs. Core beliefs are a part of the subconscious and start to form at a very young age, as soon as you are able to perceive yourself and the world. As you grow, your experiences and interactions with others, and how you internalize them all contribute to building and solidifying core beliefs. According to CBT, our thoughts, emotions and actions are the effect of these self-perceptions. Nonetheless, since they are buried deep in the subconscious mind, often we don't realize what our core beliefs are unless we work toward understanding them.

Even when we know that [fear of failure causes procrastination](#), that's too broad of a concept. Apprehension may be brought about by a variety of core beliefs and so, in order to clean up the sticky mess that is procrastination, we need to look into some research-based triggers, behind that fear.

## We Seek What We Believe

According to [self-verification theory](#) we behave in a way and connect to people who verify our own beliefs about ourselves. If those self-perceptions are positive, then we engage in productive behaviors and seek people who evaluate us positively. If, however, one's self-beliefs are negative, then this becomes a steppingstone to procrastination. In short, we self-sabotage rather than engaging in productive work. That is why procrastinators tend to occupy themselves with meaningless tasks. Have you noticed how some people remember to clean out the fridge, binge-read all of their bookmarked articles and go on endless

YouTube loops, just when they've got some less appealing chore to do? [According to professor Joseph Ferrari, Ph.D.](#), who has been studying procrastination for years, this self-handicap is the direct result of fear. Procrastinators swap out important tasks for futile activities because when you don't engage in that something scary, there is no chance to fail at it. Thus, [self-handicapping](#) is a way to verify our own negative self-perceptions—we deprive ourselves of opportunities because of a deeply rooted belief that it is impossible to succeed.

## Are You Good Enough?

How you perceive your own competence and ability to deal with a task on your own is also a contributing factor to fear of failure. [Self-determination theory](#), which deals with people's motivation, explains the importance of intrinsic incentives. When a person is keen to engage with a task because of internal stimuli, such as beliefs and needs, they become intensely invested. In contrast, motivation that comes from external sources is short-lived and inefficient. Feeling competent and autonomous builds intrinsic motivation and people are, therefore, less likely to procrastinate. On the other hand, when you doubt your own abilities and fear that you can't handle the task on your own, [you are more likely to put it off](#)

## What Will Others Think?

Doubts about one's self-worth may lead to an intensified need for the approval of others. If your core beliefs include a suspicion that you are not good enough and that you should continuously prove yourself to others, in order to feel deserving, this may contribute to fear of failure and therefore, procrastination. Fearing shame can lead to [putting off a task, or even avoiding efforts to improve your skills](#). Often, the subconscious belief here is that the longer you dodge a task, the longer you'll protect yourself from negative evaluations by others, as well as shame. On the other hand, procrastinators who fear shame, often [strive for perfection](#), so that others view them as worthy and competent. In that way, if they feel they can achieve anything short of perfection, they put off a task for as long as possible.

## What Can You Do About It?

As you can see, procrastination is not a simple behavioral problem. In fact, it can be viewed as a symptom of deeply rooted fear and self-doubt. Using CBT techniques on your own, or working with a therapist, can help you reveal your negative core beliefs and therefore understand what it is that you fear. Furthermore, you can benefit from the principles of [self-regulation theory](#). Monitor your thoughts, emotions and behavior, see how they impact your tendency to procrastinate and experiment with different behavioral strategies to see what works best for your personal case.

*[Liya Panayotova](#) is a clinical and counseling psychologist, with interests in the cognitive-behavioral sciences. Her experience includes working with anxiety, depression, difficult relationships, addiction, motivation, children, grief and many more.*

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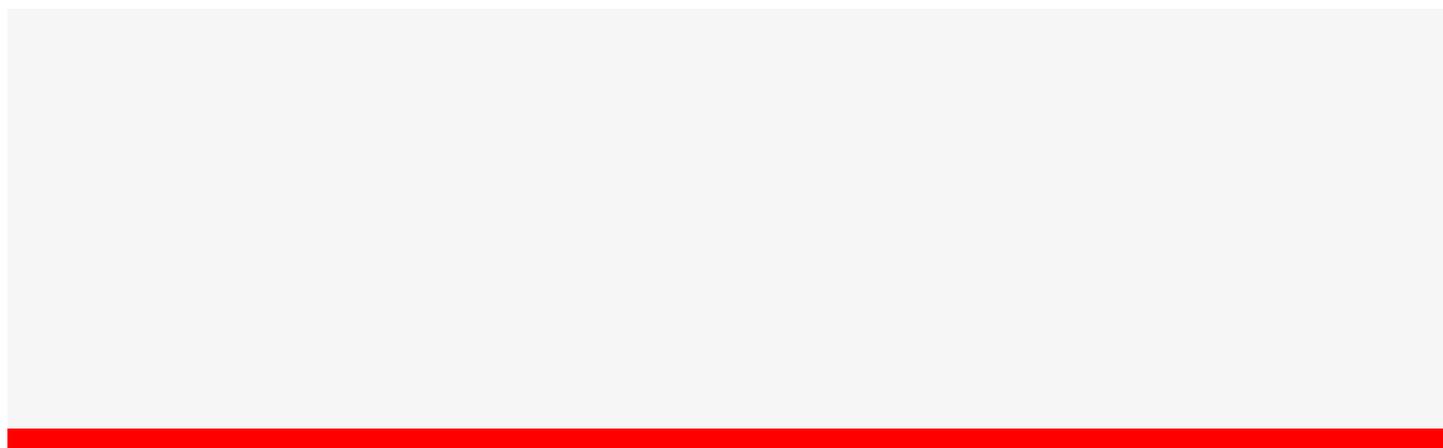
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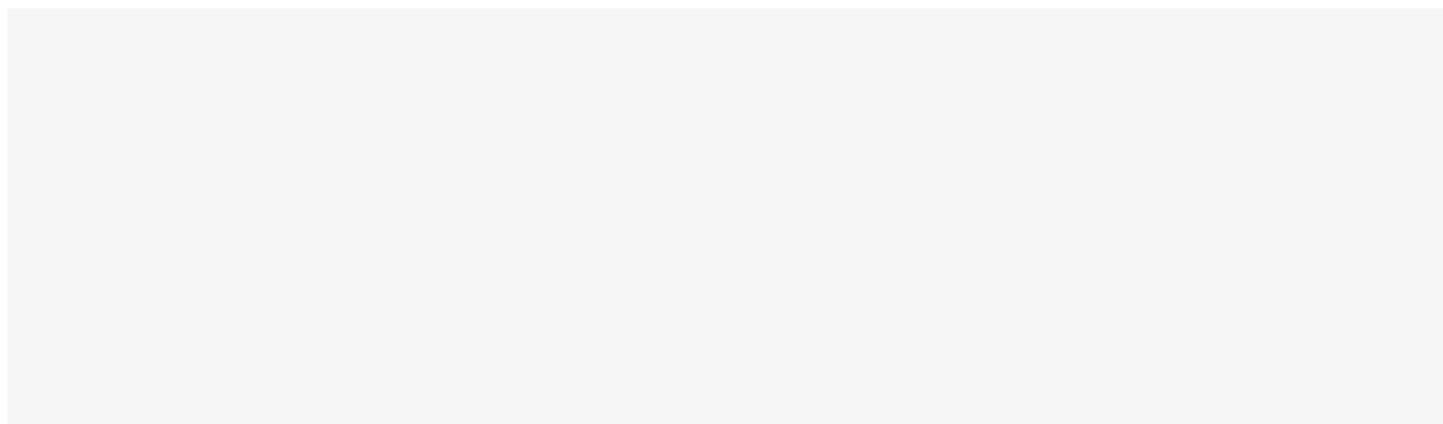
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