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## When can procrastinating be healthy?

We often hear about the negative effects of procrastinating, from the additional stress it causes to poorer task performance. Yet, some experts believe there is a type of procrastination that can be considered healthy. What is this art of procrastination, and how can it lead to positive outcomes?

### Can procrastination be a good thing?

When we think about why we procrastinate, we typically try to identify the psychological factors hindering our motivation. We know that we would be better off starting the task at hand now, yet we delay due to issues like fear of failure, or becoming easily distracted, or because we find it hard to value a reward for our efforts if it's nebulous or too far in the future.

However, some scientists argue that this only describes one type of procrastination. They believe that when it is planned and controlled, positive effects of procrastination can be achieved.

### Productivity versus creativity

Professor Adam Grant, an organisational psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that while procrastination negatively affects productivity, it can in fact [promote creativity](#).

In a study where participants were asked to come up with new business ideas, Grant found that the procrastinators were 28% more creative. He theorises that this is because procrastination gives us time for divergent thinking – which involves considering multiple alternative solutions for the same problem.

According to Grant, this creative thinking happens 'in the background' of our brains when we delay a task. Our preoccupation with it does not completely disappear and our minds have time to find innovative solutions before we commit properly to starting it.

A [study](#) of 853 university students also reported increased levels of creativity in those described as "active procrastinators". This is a form of positive procrastination, and it is a definition that has divided the academic community.

## Passive versus active procrastination

If you have ever deliberately postponed a particular task to use the pressure of a near deadline as motivation, you aren't alone. This behaviour has been described by some scientists as 'active procrastination'.

While procrastination can be unhealthy when you want to find the motivation to do something but struggle to do so, active procrastination is viewed as healthy because it is controlled. The former is known as 'passive procrastination' and it has been linked with poor performance and physical and [mental health](#) issues. In contrast, the latter can prove successful in producing the desired results for a particular task.

### An example of active versus passive procrastination

- **Passive procrastination** - a student puts off doing their homework because they are worried that they won't get it right. As a result, the delay causes them unnecessary **stress**, and they end up rushing close to the deadline and not performing as well as they could have.
- **Active procrastination** - a student intentionally puts off doing their homework until close to the deadline because they know they concentrate best under time pressure. This doesn't cause them stress, and the delay positively impacts the quality of their work.

[Experts](#) argue that there are four characteristics shared by active procrastinators:

- They deliberately choose to procrastinate.
- They prefer working under pressure.
- They can meet deadlines despite time pressure.
- They are pleased with their resultant work.

These points make an important distinction between negative procrastination and positive procrastination that can be considered healthy. While this sounds like good news for all those with a tendency towards putting things off, it seems you may not have a say in which type of procrastinator you are.

Some psychologists believe that these types can be explained by [different cognitive \(decision to procrastinate\), affective \(preference for time pressure\), and behavioural \(task completion by deadline\) components](#). The ways in which we think (our cognitive pathways) influence our ability to complete a task under pressure, and how this affects us emotionally.

## Negative versus positive effects

If you feel that you have the characteristics of an active procrastinator, there is research to suggest that you may experience [the same positive outcomes as non-procrastinators](#), when both are compared to passive procrastinators.

These benefits include the following:

- **Healthy stress levels.**
- Higher self-efficacy (your confidence in your ability to behave in a certain way and perform to a particular standard).
- Greater ability to use time effectively.
- Higher **academic achievement**.
- Improved ability **to solve problems in a creative way**.
- An increased tendency **to be in a 'flow state' while working** (being immersed in a task to the point where you can effortlessly ignore distractions and lose track of time).

However, it's important to note that the evidence of these positive outcomes is inconsistent. Active procrastination [doesn't always lead to better academic results and self-efficacy](#).

One [study](#) of active procrastinators even found that this group avoided work and performance, had low motivation levels, used ineffective strategies for task completion, and performed poorly in tests.

## Active procrastination versus deliberate/planned delay

The concept of active procrastination is also highly debated in academic circles. Some [experts](#) argue that active procrastination does not include the defining features of procrastination. These include the psychological features (such as lack of self-control and the gap between intention and action) and related outcomes (eg stress or [depression](#)). From this perspective, it may be more appropriate to call this behaviour 'deliberate delay'.

Professor Stephen Palmer, a chartered psychologist and [British Psychological Society](#) (BPS) member, also warns that it's easy to confuse procrastination with planned delay.

"With a planned delay, there are valid reasons for deferring action - for instance, not currently having the funds to join a gym or requiring more information about an option."

## Understanding these distinctions

Given these inconsistencies in the research surrounding healthy procrastination, if you are considering deliberately delaying an action then you should assess the situation carefully.

By asking yourself the following, you can determine if this behaviour is healthy or unhealthy:

1. The reason why you're procrastinating – for example, because you are more creative closer to deadlines or because you're scared of making mistakes.
2. Whether it causes you to experience any negative outcomes – for example, more stress or worse performance.

It can be useful to understand the distinction between passive and active procrastination as well as the caveats around them. This knowledge may help you to make an informed decision next time you have an essay deadline, an interview to revise for, or a presentation to rehearse.

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**Last updated by:**

Amberley Davis  
19/01/2022

**Peer reviewed by:**

Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP  
19/01/2022

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