



Episode 20 - Procrastination Part 1

Welcome to this episode of the managing your smart mind podcast with Master Certified Coach Else Kramer, a.k.a. Coach Kramer.

Hey smart and sometimes procrastinating humans!

This week brings you the first Episode of a series on procrastination.

It's a topic that is so enmeshed with things like perfectionism, identity, self-trust, self-regulation and time management that it takes at least two Episodes to tease it all apart.

In this first part I will cover

1. What procrastination is
2. What happens when you procrastinate

3. When it becomes a problem
4. Whether everyone procrastinates
5. Why smart humans have a higher risk of procrastination
6. How to overcome procrastination

In the second part of this series I'm going to do a deep dive into strategies to overcome procrastination. I'll give you a whole series and show you how you can make them much more effective using a three-pronged approach (wow, I think I've been longing to use that word for a very long time!).

But, as always, first things first.

1. What *is* procrastination?

Here's a simple dictionary definition:

"The action of avoiding or delaying something"

Now I think that definition is somewhat incomplete - because when we procrastinate, we don't just sit and do NOTHING.

We actually *do something else* instead of the thing we are supposed to be doing.

Instead of studying for your exam, you fold laundry.

Instead of making sales calls, you take another course on how to sell.

Instead of doing yoga, you watch yoga influencers on social media.

The way I define procrastination is like this:

The act of replacing something you decided to do earlier with something that feels better in the moment.

Or, in neurological terms: it's our primitive brain winning over your prefrontal cortex. Which is a nice segway into the next question:

2. What happens when you procrastinate?

It's quite simple.

First, you feel an uncomfortable emotion about the thing you are supposed to be doing (probably more than one).

For example:

Boredom when you're doing admin.

Frustration when dealing with customer service.

Fear or anxiety about doing or creating something new, like a new podcast Episode (yup, I still get this every week).

Your brain then notices the discomfort - and tries to fix it in the easiest possible way: by getting you to AVOID the task.

It will do this by offering you lots of 'better' (read: easier) alternatives.

- Instead of making that difficult phone call, it will offer that you need to clean the kitchen.
- Instead of going for an early morning run, it will suggest that you go into work early and run in the evening (which then never happens).
- Instead of writing a LinkedIn article, it will kindly suggest that you read at least two books about the topic.

This is the battle you're up against, and if you're not prepared, it's really quite unfair.

What your brain is doing is the equivalent of telling a kid 'hey, you can tidy this room - or you could eat candy instead'.

The easiest, most rewarding thing *in the moment* is to eat the candy, so that is what we tend to default to.

3. When does procrastination become problematic?

First, when you don't get around to doing the things that are important or meaningful to you in the long-term. In Stephen Covey terms: the stuff that lives in the second quadrant of important/non-urgent.

These are the things that make you feel fulfilled.

For example, getting fit, cleaning out the shed, writing a fantasy novel, climbing the Kilimanjaro, or finally visiting LEGO House (please hold me accountable on this dear listeners, it is going to happen in 2023).

If you stay stuck in day-to-day urgencies life starts to feel like a meaningless drag - and, in a way, it is.

Second: when you never give yourself enough time to do projects in a way that aligns with your standards and values.

Sure, you get it done. You may even tell yourself that you work really well under pressure. And get told that your work is 'amazing' because you're smart enough to fabricate something not too shabby even in a limited amount of time.

But in the long run this will leave you deeply unfulfilled, because

- a. You're not doing your best work
- b. You start to question what the point is, if your 30% is always good enough

Third: procrastination can send you into a negative spiral of anxiety, self-hatred and, eventually depression.

Here's how that works.

Your procrastination causes you stress, which makes you prone to unhealthy habits and bad sleep patterns.

This only increases your anxiety and makes it harder to function well, increasing your tendency to procrastinate.

Leading to even more stress, etc.

Fourth: (and this happens to a lot of people with ADHD brains) procrastination can get you into real trouble if it interferes with your ability to deal with the real world. Like opening mail, shipping projects on time, etc.

A little procrastination is human - but if you recognise one or more of the above, you want to get to work to keep it in check.

4. Does everyone procrastinate?

No, but most people do in at least some areas of their lives.

It could be health, chores, work, admin - there's usually something people hate to do and try to get out of.

So if you're a procrastinator you're definitely not alone.

That said, there are people on the 'other' side of the procrastination spectrum who get so anxious by postponing tasks that procrastinating would cause MORE discomfort. For them, procrastinating isn't the 'easy way out', it's terrifying. Which may sound nice to you if you're a professional procrastinator, but like any extreme, this isn't great either.

There are also people who simply experience less discomfort when tackling boring, new or otherwise challenging tasks - they got lucky.

5. Why are smart humans more prone to procrastination?

Well, first off, they are incredibly good at making up reasonably sounding excuses - especially the 'I need to study more' card is often played.

It seems so noble and wholesome to want to learn more - it's not like you're getting drunk instead of getting to work. So this is a great way of conning yourself into procrastination.

Another reason why smart people tend to procrastinate more than average is **perfectionism**.

If you grew up being praised for your achievements your brain may have started **equating your identity with what you achieve in life**.

Perfectionism is a misguided strategy to keep that identity intact (more about that in a later podcast). It protects you from the pain you associate with not succeeding at something.

If you're very good at learning that maybe **you never learned how to do hard things** - everything has always come very easy. You simply can't deal with all the yucky feelings that come up!

Then there's **the massive amount of ideas you have**. I mean, you could be doing a thousand things right now, many of which would be equally amazing. So why not do those instead?

And then there's your **ability to see a thousand ways to make things better**. Deep down inside you know that once you've done the thing, you'll also see all the ways in which you could have done a better job. Not very appealing, is it?

Last but not least: **the inability to estimate how long something is going to take**.

Most smart humans do things at a non-average speed. This makes it hard to predict how long a project will take - especially if you're also blessed with a neurodivergent brain.

This 'I have no idea how long this is going to take' can be enough in itself to cause discomfort in your brain, causing you to procrastinate.

6. Fixing procrastination

Ok, so now we're at the part you've been waiting for.

You now know what procrastination is: **taking an unplanned action to avoid a feeling in the moment.**

So how do you stop it? Do you just willpower your way through?

Does a lot of procrastination mean you're weak and/or lazy?

Nope.

And no again.

Willpower doesn't work - it's not a sustainable solution. As in: it will deplete your energy stores if you have to rely on it again and again.

What *is* sustainable?

Learning how to manage your emotions and your mind.

As said, you want to come at the Procrastination Beast from three angles: thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

Most advice in the procrastination realm usually focuses on behaviour.

There are lots of tips to help you create conditions to *avoid* procrastination, like killing all distractions in your work environment.

But this completely bypasses what's going on in your mind and body - it addresses the symptoms, not the cause.

So next week, in the second part of this series I'll discuss what you can do in all of these different areas (behaviour, thoughts and feelings) to reduce procrastination to a mildly tolerable level (yes, you're still human).

In the meantime, here's what I want you to do.

Start noticing how you procrastinate - that makes it easier to catch it.

What are your favourite 'modi procrastinandi'?

For example, I tend to procrastinate with my phone, inbox, plants, social media, sorting things and checking the latest lego prices. So if I'm doing any of these I want to check in with myself to see if I'm actively avoiding doing something else.

Then, once you've identified your favourite modes of procrastination you're ready for the next step: **start noticing what FEELINGS you're trying to avoid.**

And this, by the way, is why I don't want you to start by 'killing all distractions' and using other how-to's. Because then you'll never get to the core of what's going on. Plus we don't always control our environment, so why make ourselves dependent on it?

I know I tend to grab my phone whenever I'm doing something hard and hit a bump. When I'm writing, for example, and I have no idea what to write next.

I've noticed that in those moments, I'm trying to get away from the feeling of insecurity (WHICH I HATE - I want to KNOW what I'm doing and feel certain; well, my perfectionism does anyway).

Good to know.

I tend to want to eat or drink something when I get bored. This tends to show up when I'm very repetitive or unchallenging, like dealing with bureaucratic stuff.

So when I head for the kitchen without being hungry, I know I'm trying to avoid the feeling of boredom.

And I want to play games on my iPad when I'm avoiding making a decision. Making decisions for me is often associated with a feeling of loss, for example all the things I'm NOT going to have time to do. It also causes anxiety (is it the right

decision) - so if I'm not managing my mind before I know it I'll have been playing Hearthstone for half an hour.

Over the next seven days, I want you to get intimate with your own procrastination patterns.

What do they look like for you, and what are the corresponding feelings you're trying to get away from?

Observe yourself this week, and bring your results to the next Episode, when we'll get to work on overcoming procrastination.

Until then, have an amazing week!

Else

Do you want to get a handle on procrastination so you can start doing fulfilling, meaningful work again? Then work with me one-on-one. DM me on [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) or [Facebook](#) to learn how, or send me an email via podcast@elsekramer.com.

Thank you for listening to the Managing the Smart Mind Podcast, I love that at the time of recording this there are listeners in 59 countries! I am waving at all of you!