

I'll Do It...

later

~~after~~

~~now~~

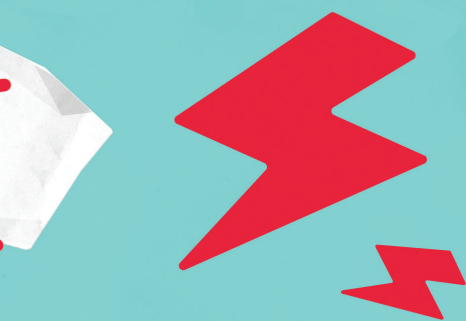
~~not~~

~~tomorrow~~

~~some~~



Later



A Multi-Lens Approach to Understanding and Addressing Procrastination

Kelli Chen, MS, OTR/L

YOU SWORE TODAY WAS THE DAY:

the closet would get cleaned, the inbox tackled, that big project finally started. And yet, somehow, you're deep into a snack, a scroll, or a sudden urge to alphabetize your spice rack.

Procrastination isn't just a bad habit, it's a deeply human one. For many neurodivergent individuals, including those with ADHD, it's a daily struggle rooted not in laziness but in how the brain processes motivation, emotion, and overwhelm. So why do we put things off, even when we want to do them? To answer that, we need to look beyond willpower.

This article explores procrastination through three intersecting lenses: economic models of motivation, psychological insights into avoidance, and occupational therapy's focus on daily life participation. Understanding what drives delay can help us move from intention to action, with a little more clarity and a lot more consideration.

The economics-informed lens: motivation and timing

Why do we promise our future selves we'll clean out the perpetually overflowing closet on Saturday, only to hit the credits of a crime doc for the fifth time instead?

According to behavioral economics, this has to do with *time-inconsistent preferences*, or our tendency to plan for long-term goals, only to abandon them when the moment arrives to get started. We overvalue immediate rewards (like the comfort of watching TV) and undervalue delayed benefits (like the satisfaction of a clean closet). This phenomenon is known as *hyperbolic discounting* (Ainslie, 1975). What felt like a great plan on Wednesday quickly loses its appeal when Saturday rolls around and the couch is calling.

Researcher Piers Steel built on this idea with temporal motivation theory (TMT), adding the concepts of *task value* and *confidence*. Motivation peaks when a task feels important, doable, and rewarding in the short term. It plummets when a task is far-off, unpleasant, or overwhelming, especially for those with ADHD, who are often wired to seek stimulation and quick feedback. When boring meets distant, reorganizing the closet doesn't stand a chance against "just one more episode."

In short, we're not irrational, we're wired to prioritize short-term comfort. The economics lens helps to explain why our best-laid plans often dissolve in real time.

What helps? Applying the lens

- **Increase do-ability.** Break tasks into smaller chunks and focus on just one step at a time. Tools like checklists, timers, or even structured AI prompts can reduce executive function barriers by making the “how” more visible and actionable.
- **Increase desirability.** Make the task more appealing. Pair it with music or do it in a favorite spot. Reconnect with your personal “why.” Visualize the benefit of completion to tap into internal motivation.
- **Reduce impulsiveness.** Create space between the urge and the action. Move your phone out of reach, use website blockers, or activate the “ten-minute rule” in which you commit to just ten minutes (or five, or two), then reassess. Starting is often the hardest part.
- **Close the gap.** When rewards feel distant, motivation drops. Create short-term incentives (like a break or a small treat), use visible progress trackers, or mentally simulate/visualize the “done” feeling to make the reward feel closer.

The psychological lens: emotion and avoidance

You sit down to start an important project, only to suddenly feel the intense urge to clean your junk drawer. You *know* the project is more important, but somehow, that drawer has never looked messier. This is avoidance at work.

From a psychological lens, procrastination is often less about time and more about emotion. As researcher Timothy Pychyl notes, procrastination is not a time management problem, but an *emotion regulation problem*. Avoiding a task offers temporary relief from discomfort, whether it's anxiety, fear of failure, perfectionism, shame, or simply boredom.

That escape feels good in the moment, but when the task resurfaces (closer to the deadline and now layered with guilt), it often feels worse. This creates a cycle of avoidance and increasing distress. Even meaningful tasks can be delayed if they stir up uncomfortable emotions. Stress, self-doubt, and overcommitment only make this cycle more likely.



What helps? Applying the lens

- **Name the emotion.** Ask yourself what you're *actually* feeling: dread, anxiety, guilt, shame? Naming emotions helps you recognize them without being ruled by them.
- **Use self-compassion.** Instead of “What’s wrong with me?” try “It makes sense that I’m anxious, because this matters to me.” Self-compassion reduces avoidance and increases emotional resilience.
- **Reframe the task.** Challenge unhelpful thoughts. “This has to be perfect” can become “Done is better than perfect.” Cognitive reframing reduces the pressure.
- **Build discomfort tolerance.** You can survive feeling uncomfortable. Try sitting with the task for just a few minutes. Exposure in small doses reduces the emotional sting over time.
- **Check for burnout.** Sometimes procrastination is a signal, not a flaw. If everything feels hard, you may be overwhelmed or dysregulated. In those cases, rest, support, or adjusted expectations may be more helpful than pushing through.

The occupational therapy lens: participation and daily life patterns

Picture a college student with ADHD trying to start an online assignment late at night from a cluttered dorm room, after a day of back-to-back classes and no meals. The task feels vague, the space is

distracting, and the body is running on fumes. It's not a lack of willpower, it's a mismatch between task, person, and context

Occupational therapy approaches procrastination as a *participation* issue. It's not just about what's getting delayed, it's about how daily life patterns, routines, and environments support (or hinder) action. Occupational scientists Zemke and Clark emphasized how routines shape our engagement. When routines are out of sync with someone's needs or neurotype, procrastination can surface not as failure, but as friction.

OTs consider how executive function, sensory needs, task demands, and context all interact. A vague task, an overstimulating space, or a chaotic schedule can make initiation feel like climbing a mountain. For neurodivergent individuals in particular, task initiation may require tailored supports and structured scaffolding.

From this perspective, procrastination is often a sign that *something in the system* needs adjustment, not just the person.

What helps? Applying the lens

- **Modify routines.** Supportive routines reduce decision fatigue. Anchor tasks to existing habits (five minutes of cleanup after breakfast, for example) to build momentum.
- **Structure the task.** If a task feels overwhelming, break it down. Use visual checklists or time-blocking (carving out specific time to tackle a task) to give form and clarity.

- **Adjust the environment.** Tweak lighting, noise, posture, or workspace layout to reduce overstimulation or under-stimulation. Even working near others (body doubling) can increase task engagement.
- **Use activation strategies.** If your nervous system feels shut down, prime it with movement, cold water, or upbeat music. These quick inputs can promote a shift from inertia to action.
- **Leverage active procrastination.** Doing a less-urgent productive task (like organizing your desk) instead of the main one? Use that energy as a bridge, not a detour. Reframe it as warming up, then circle back to the task that matters.

Understand the *why* behind the delay

Understanding procrastination requires more than grit, it calls for curiosity. Whether it's short-term rewards, emotional avoidance, or daily life misalignment, procrastination is often a signal worth decoding. When we understand the *why* behind the delay, we're better equipped to offer ourselves support instead of shame. We're also more easily able to build systems that turn intention into action.

With a little reframing and the right strategies, "I'll do it later" doesn't have to be a trap. It can be the start of a plan. 📌



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ADDITIONAL READING

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