



## Before – and after

### *How to stop avoiding the unavoidable task*

I had one more page to go to finish the thesis for my master's. And yet, there I was, scrubbing brush in one hand, bottle of bleach in the other... cleaning the bathroom floor, in the middle of the night. What was I doing? I knew I had to finish the paper, it was just that my brain kept telling me to clean the bathroom instead. It wasn't until many years later that I discovered this was a common problem (a writing partner of mine would start hoovering his living-room floor every time we were close to finishing the last page of our screenplay).

In fact, many people get stuck in the same pattern of urgent cleaning, household errands that must be done right now or non-stop internet browsing that suddenly feels important when a deadline is imminent. When the brain decides to avoid something, prioritising tasks becomes difficult. It feels

overwhelming to focus and get your head into gear. Basically, it's saying: 'I'll do anything to avoid completing this un-fun task that I've been instructed to do right now.'

Unfortunately, life has other plans. Week to week, there are undoubtedly un-fun tasks with deadlines that must be met, whether it's work, family or house related. And although most people understand having mental resistance to something in theory, it's a different story when your own impenetrable wall springs up before your eyes and blocks your path.

So, how can you stop avoiding the unavoidable tasks ahead? How do you take the first step to breaking down the self-built resistance towards things we must do? There are myriad solutions offered, but for me some of the most effective involve taking things one step at a time (see right).

## HOW TO PROCRASTI-NOT

*Six ways you can start to approach that un-fun but inescapable task...*

**1 Picture how you will feel after you complete it**  
Visualise the feeling that you would like to have after the task is done, rather than the specifics of going through it. In this way, the brain is pulled out of stress mode, and focuses instead on the relief or satisfaction that will come once the work has been completed. See yourself there now. How do you feel? Connect with that sensation and use that image as your new end goal. Practise the feeling ahead of time to teach your brain how to get there.

**2 Take it one small step at a time**  
One reason for resistance to a task is that the brain is jumping forward too fast and trying to do too many stages at once, instead of focusing on one small section at a time. Seeing things in shorter, smaller steps can help you to feel less overwhelmed.

What is one small, simple thing you could do to move forward? Write a sentence? Make a phone call? Read a chapter of a textbook? Whatever it is, do it first and you'll start moving yourself forward. Don't take on too much, move forward with tiny segments.

**3 Use positive self-talk**  
A day or two before you start the task, increase your positive self-talk. Ease yourself into the project with statements such as: 'I'm doing it one step at a time' or 'I'm good at figuring out things. I've figured out stuff before and I'll figure it out again.' This will help to build self-confidence and increase your own personal belief that you will complete your goal.

**4 Connect with the fun**  
Try to find the enjoyment in a task or project and connect with that first. Resistance comes when the brain's been told that something isn't fun to do. What part of the assignment is gratifying? Sometimes, it's just the relief of completing it, the idea of learning a new skill, the idea of building confidence as you go along or it might be solving a puzzle or conquering a challenge. On other occasions, you might find a way to approach the assignment in a way that changes the task from un-fun to fun. Try to figure out what works for you with each project. If absolutely nothing about the task is enjoyable, think about how you'll reward yourself when the job's done. Which leads on to the next point...

**5 Create a reward for yourself**  
Positive reinforcement works for kids, so why not try it yourself to get you through a tricky task? What treat will you give yourself when it's over? What fun will you allow yourself to have? The key here is not to give yourself the specific reward until after the task is complete. This way your brain will associate the reward with the end goal.

**6 Remind yourself that it's not forever**  
No task is endless. Everything in life is temporary – just as the feeling of resistance is as well. It will pass. The task will soon be over. Keep thinking about how things will be after you're done, and you've already started moving yourself forward.

Until then, plan an exciting reward, connect with the fun, and stay away from scrubbing the bathroom – at least until after you've met your deadline.

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