Editorial

Procrustian Procrastination

“Procrastination is the thief of time.” – Edward Young, 1765

While browsing the Web after the New Year, I came upon an article which peaked my curiosity. It was a piece titled “Tomorrow… tomorrow: why we procrastinate.” Although I have long been aware that procrastination is a part of my personality, I was interested to see if there was information to further expand my knowledge and examine my procrastination tendencies. This article, like many on the Internet, was a self-help piece purported to give an intellectual discussion about procrastination therefore allowing me to better understand and control my tendencies.

I often go through an introspective, critical self-examination at the beginning of the New Year to determine if my concerns about the last year are those of neurotic self absorption or valid defects in the way I am running my life. Looking at the pile of unedited manuscripts, the list of unfinished tasks around the house and the optimistic list of articles I hoped to write, I realized that it was time to look at the level of my procrastination index.

Sometimes I find that my procrastination takes the form of small directed compulsive tasks where I arrange the work I am doing in neat piles, thinking this is getting me to completion. We all have little procrastination tricks we do such as looking for the appropriate color pen, finding untrammeled paper to work on, or needing to make a very clear work space before we approach our tasks. It is when these little road blocks get in the way of our major forward progress that we need to do a critical assessment.

The internet article quotes psychologists Joseph Ferreraí, Ph.D. and Timothy Pychyl, Ph.D. These men have done studies on procrastination and have elevated the topic to a level beyond that which I think it deserves. But I was delighted to see that there were various categories of procrastination and various levels of intensity. This meant, of course, that we could rate ourselves and give ourselves an index where we stand compared to others. The psychologists stated that in 20% of the population, procrastination is chronic and can be debilitating. These are people who chronically do not pay their bills on time, don’t cash gift certificates on time, and do their Christmas shopping on Christmas Eve at the Super America store. Already I am happy with this grouping, since it only rarely includes me.

The categories of people who procrastinate are definitely made up of people you recognize. See if you can find yourself in any of these.

1. Arousal Type/Thrill Seeker Procrastinators are those who by wait until the last minute on a deadline-crunch to receive some adrenaline rush. These are people who feel they may be more creative with a deadline looming ahead but actually throw away a the valuable resource of time.

2. Fear-of-Failure Procrastinators are those who feel that completing a task puts them at risk of being ridiculed by others. We all fall into this group when we need to present our poor results at a Complications Conference or when we procrastinate in looking up the results of a procedure we know are not “stellar.”

3. Decisional Procrastinators are those who cannot make decisions and therefore set up multiple sub-committees to study the problem. These are the people who make extensive and expanding lists of problems and solutions but are never able to focus
on the important core of an issue. By doing these other tasks they appear to be heading toward the problem’s solution but really procrastinate around the periphery.

I was pleased to see that I really didn’t fit completely into any of these groups but decided it might be useful to create a group that fit me. I call my group Procrustian Procrastinators. Procrustes was a character out of Greek mythology who owned a very malevolent bed. He waylaid travelers and invited them to sleep in his bed. The bed was designed to make everyone conform to the size available. If the traveler was too short the bed would stretch him and if he was too tall a guillotine-type knife would adjust the leg lengths to fit the bed.

I am often forced to make Procrustian adjustments in the final design of a project to make it fit into my procrastinated time frame. I always have a supply of Ecta-Chrome slide film on my desk. This film can be developed in a six-hour time and allows me to take pictures and get slides in a day to then finish a talk which I have procrastinated doing. I don’t do that anymore! Okay, so now modern digital technology now allows me to procrastinate up until 15 minutes before my talk, making last minute additions and modifications in my PowerPoint presentation. Technology has changed the mode in which I procrastinate but not the underlying problem.

Some experts say that the root problem of procrastination is self regulation. I think this is too simplistic a statement. We can self regulate as much as we want but getting the job done is more a matter of hedonistic utilitarianism. We put off onerous tasks and select those that give more immediate gratification. When I was first looking at this problem I thought it was a matter of controlling the number of tasks that I was attempting within a time frame. But then I realized, even if the list were much shorter I still set a priority based on the pleasure/pain principle each task brings. It therefore is not really a time management problem (psychologist Dr. Ferreari says that telling someone who is a chronic procrastinator to purchase weekly planner is like telling someone with chronic depression to just cheer up). We can manage our time well, it is that we don’t have enough of it.

For me, I think it’s a matter of “biting the bullet” and pacing myself. It becomes a matter of tempo in that if I perform and complete more onerous tasks first I can then reward myself with a more pleasurable ones.

It is interesting that one of the concluding statements of this Internet article is that procrastinators can change their behavior. It does take a lot of mental energy so I think I am going to do it, but probably next year.

Lowell D. Lutter, M.D.
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ERRATA

In the January 2003 issue (Vol. 24 No. 1, p 40) the article by Bibbo et al. “Rheumatoid Nodules and Postoperative Complications” should have been titled “The Influence of Rheumatoid Chemotherapy, Age, and Presence of Rheumatoid Nodules on Postoperative Complications in Rheumatoid Foot and Ankle Surgery: Analysis of 725 Procedures in 104 Patients.” Key Words: Postoperative Complications; Rheumatoid Arthritis; Rheumatoid Nodules; Chemotherapy-Rheumatoid Arthritis.

In the November 2002 issue (Vol. 23 No. 11, p 1018) we listed incorrect information about one of the authors of the article “Concurrent Interdigital Neuroma and MTP Joint Instability: Long-term Results of Treatment.” The author’s name is Paul S. Shurnas, M.D. and he is located in Mountain Home, AR.