

Vicious circle of procrastination

This vicious circle can be used to explain why the usually dysfunctional behavior of procrastination is maintained despite negative consequences. We start at the top in the middle and go clockwise.

At the beginning, there is always a specific situation that is like a starting signal and reminds you of a concrete intention. For example, the alarm clock rings in the morning. The plan for this morning was to study at home at the desk. For example, with the ringing alarm clock comes the automatic thought, "I'll never make it." This thought is accompanied by feelings of fear of failure, frustration, anger or sadness. People generally strive to feel neutral, that is, to feel neither particularly strongly positive nor particularly strongly negative. Procrastination behavior avoids the situation that triggers such feelings. For example, one continues to sleep or gets up and attends to other tasks that trigger less arousing feelings. The elimination of negative arousal creates an immediate reward cycle: a situation/task triggers unpleasant feelings and thoughts. Procrastination prevents this negative arousal, so the procrastination behavior is rewarded, i.e. "reinforced" in psychological vocabulary. The consequence is that procrastination behavior is always used as a strategy for unpleasant tasks because it results in a positive consequence (elimination of negative arousal). In the long run, procrastination usually results in negative consequences, such as a bad feelings, guilt, fear of failure, or time pressure. These long-term negative consequences usually lead to the initially unpleasant task growing into a perceived unfulfillable task.

Instruction

Fill in your individual vicious cycle of procrastination. Start with the triggering situation that causes the procrastination behavior. What exactly is happening? Is it the alarm clock that you keep setting to snooze? Or is it the arrival at your home that immediately tempts you to do housework?

In the second step, consider: What thoughts and evaluations are playing out in your mind immediately before you procrastinate? What task do you have pending that you then avoid? What are you thinking during this time? You will not only have thoughts, but also an emotional reaction. How do you feel immediately with such thoughts and evaluations?

The third step is procrastination. What does this look like for you specifically? How do you procrastinate in this specific situation? Do you stay in bed instead of getting up? Do you do other tasks?

Now try to derive your individual consequences from this situation: What are the (mostly negative) long-term consequences for you of procrastinating in this specific situation? You may be tormented by a bad conscience, reproaches against yourself or similar. The long-term consequences are usually easier to formulate than the (mostly positive) short-term ones. Stop for a moment and ask yourself: What are the immediate benefits of my procrastination behavior? What do I actually "get" from this behavior? What are the positive effects of

procrastination? Maybe you enjoy answering your emails more than the original task you had set out to accomplish.

Conclusion

Now that you know what situation can trigger your procrastination behavior, you can try to specifically avoid or reframe that situation. Design your situations in a way that you are less "tempted" to procrastinate. "Turn off" distractions. Try to endure unpleasant feelings for a few minutes and do the unpleasant task anyway. Create a daily plan with specific goals for the next work session. To redesign your work situations, other worksheets from the Toolbox can help you (e.g., "Procrastination and Golden Moments," "Work Planning and Structuring").

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