Episode 22 - Procrastination Part 3

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

Hello smart human!

Welcome to part 3, the final instalment (for now anyway) of this series on procrastination.

In the first two parts, I looked at what procrastination is, why smart people are more susceptible to it, what causes it and how you can tackle the thoughts and feelings that trigger it.

If you haven't checked out those earlier episodes yet I highly recommend that you do so first, because everything I share here will make much more sense.

That said - you're a smart human, so you'll probably do pretty much whatever you want, I would too!

You know after the last episode that two strategies to combat procrastination are:

- Sitting with procrastination-causing feelings rather than trying to get away from them
- Looking at the underlying thoughts that are causing those feelings, and modifying them.

But procrastination is pretty much boss-level, so we want to have more up our sleeve when we tackle it.

In this episode, I will share a myriad of ways to undermine, disarm and defeat the Procrastination-beast.

These fall into two broad categories - environmental and behavioural.

I'll start with the environmental strategies - beacuse they're the most straightforward, this is the low-hanging fruit so to speak.

Environmental Strategies

As we discussed in the last episode, procrastination arises from the desire to avoid sucky feelings. Knowing that, a great additional strategy can be to simply make it harder to get away from those feelings.

Eliminating distractions can help you do that - it makes it much easier to stay put and get things done.

Now in my research on this topic, I learnt a fun new word: procrastinogenic, meaning: favouring procrastination.

A lot of us work in procrastinogenic environments: open offices, messy environments, and constant notifications on our phones or other devices.

Eliminate as many of these as you can and you've made it a lot easier for yourself to get things done.

Switch your phone to airplane mode, use apps that cut you off from the internet (there are many, both for mobile and desktop), or go work in a place with fewer distractions than your regular office, for example, a cafe or a coworking space.

This will make it much easier to catch that urge to distract yourself, and not give in to it.

Feel like you need an extra boost? Then use mood hacks to get you in the right mindset, like playing a power music playlist or moving your body for a couple of minutes before you start working on your project.

Set yourself up for success by creating an environment that eliminates distractions. Just don't use this as another procrastination tactic, by deciding that you need to reorganise your office first before you can get started on your presentation!

There are hundreds of additional practical anti-procrastinogenic tips out there, Google is your friend (just don't get sucked into the rabbit hole).

Ok, so that's your environment covered. The other category we're going to cover is your behaviour when tackling a task you want to procrastinate on.

Behavioural strategies

1. Task Triage

Take a hard look at the task(s) you've been procrastinating on.

Is it *essential* that you do them? Do they play to your strengths? Or are you better off delegating them?

I love, for example, to outsource grocery shopping, cleaning and admin in any way I possibly can. These things are not my forte and the less I have to do with them the better.

Second, check if any of your tasks are unclear, unstructured, or otherwise ambiguous.

If so, don't even get started until you've clarified them and made them super-specific. *You can refer to the podcast Episodes on Goal-setting for more info on this.*

Third, ask yourself if your task is a should instead of a want. If that's the case, you have a decision to make.

If you really don't want to do it, and you can live with the consequences, simply scrap it.

If not, remind yourself that even though you may not like the DOING, you do WANT to get it done. Redecide and commit.

This quick task triage will leave you with a list that is much more robust when it comes to procrastination.

2. Mind how you treat yourself before, during and after

It is massively important, and incredibly fruitful, to get better at self-compassion.

Most of us have a habit of negative self-talk, and this exacerbates procrastination.

Maybe you want to start work on a task you've been putting off for a long time, and you start by calling yourself stupid, lazy, etc. Mentally trying to kick yourself into submission.

That will only make you feel awful - which then makes it even harder to get started. It's completely counterproductive.

You may also be judging yourself for procrastinating - again, this only creates more unpleasant feelings which your brain will then want to help you avoid.

Practice self-compassion and positive self-talk instead.

Observe your thoughts and feelings. Notice them without judging them, and then say something like 'of course this is happening - I am a human, with a human brain.' And carry on with what you were doing without getting sucked into a cycle of self-hatred.

Another behavioural hack that is incredibly useful is not to allow ANY self-criticism whilst you're creating.

So many times when you're creating something, for example an article, presentation or social media post, your inner critic will rear its ugly head. It will start running an unfriendly commentary that slows you down and may even stop you.

The solution to this is to not give it ANY airtime. When it comes up simply say something like: I look forward to hearing your feedback after this draft is done.

And when it comes to positive self-talk, don't forget the power of positive reinforcement.

Whenever you manage to stop procrastinating and get stuff done, celebrate (for more info on why this is good for your mental health check out Episode 9).

If you do this often enough you will create a feedback loop in your brain that will actually make it look forward to doing hard things and then feeling great afterwards, instead of a negative reinforcement cycle.

3. Using emotions as a lever

We know unwanted emotions cause us to procrastinate - what if we turn that around?

All you need to do is make the not-doing feel worse than doing the thing.

For most humans, this is where accountability can be incredibly useful.

We easily ignore promises we make to ourselves but find it much harder to break a promise made to a friend, client, or coworker.

- Ask a friend to hold you accountable.
- Tell your boss or coworker when you're going to ship.
- Use your social media followers as accountability partners - tell them what you're going to do, and that you're going to log off until it's done for example.

You can also remind yourself of the *cost* of your procrastination - if you don't do this it could cost you a lot of money, for example.

But be careful: if you scare yourself too much you may start to feel so bad that you want to run away and hide, which of course doesn't help at all. So be kind and loving, instead of a monster to your mind.

You can, of course, also use positive feelings as a lever by tapping into your why to motivate you.

I use this strategy all the time when I think creating content is too hard or too much work. I just remind myself that there are so many smart humans all over the world whose suffering I can alleviate by helping them manage their mind - and then I feel much more empowered to move through all my insecurities and self-doubt.

4. Time management

I will go into time management for smart humans in a future episode, but for now suffice to say that scheduling and time-boxing are great tools to avoid procrastination.

If you don't timebox your tasks that in itself may cause discomfort - your brain hates uncertainty.

Also, remember Parkinson's Law: tasks will stretch out to fill up all the time you allow for them.

So make sure that even when you don't know exactly how long a task or project will take, you timebox the separate steps.

5. Gamification

Turning boring or otherwise daunting tasks into challenges has been a game-changer for me.

My smart ADHD brain gets bored very quickly, so for a dull task with little pay-off I will need to find a way to make it attractive and engaging. If not, I simply won't do it.

Here are some examples to inspire you - use your own smart creative mind to craft ways that work for you:

- Turning tasks into challenges, e.g. doing something much faster than usual, or in a completely different way
- Boring tasks 'unlock' rewards or more interesting challenges
- Creating a dopamine reward loop by repeating simple rewards after completion

6. Rules

Rules are decisions you make ahead of time, and they can save you a tremendous amount of energy and mental back-and-forth.

One of my personal rules is to publish a podcast every week. This is non-negotiable.

I made that a rule that I can't and won't break. This means there is only so long I can procrastinate on recording podcasts.

Other rules I have are that I can't do anything that isn't on my to-do list for that day. This is also a great way to curb your list, which in my case always tends to be on the optimistic side.

So think about it: what are non-negotiable rules you want to decide on for yourself? Just make sure that they ARE non-negotiable - if they are rules you easily break they will only end up undermining your self-confidence, which is the last thing we want.

7. Reducing starting- and finishing-friction

Starting friction is real. It's this invisible 'bump' you have to overcome to get started on your task or project.

So how can you reduce that bump? How can you make it as easy as possible to get going?

Here are some examples:

- Lay out your workout clothes the night before.
- Make sure you clear your desk at the end of the day so you have the perfect start in the morning.
- Break your project up into the smallest possible steps so you can never be confused about or overwhelmed by what it is you need to do in the moment.

You also want to think of all the possible obstacles you could encounter whilst working and think of strategies to overcome them ahead of time. *I talk about this at length on podcast Episodes 17 and 18 on goal setting.*

OK, take a deep breath - we've just covered seven strategies to prevent or overcome procrastination.

Time for a quick recap:

1. Task Triage
2. Compassionate self-talk
3. Using emotions as a lever
4. Smart time management
5. Gamification
6. Rules
7. Reducing starting- and finishing - friction

This gives you a massive toolbox to deal with your procrastination.

And here's a quick five-step process to help you not get overwhelmed by your tools:

Whenever the urge to procrastinate hits, quickly run through these questions:

BEAT THE PROCRASTINATION BEAST

1. Am I extremely clear on what I need to do? => if not, get clarity
2. Do I really want to get it done? => if so, reconnect with why
3. Can I sit with this feeling and do it anyway? => if yes, do it!
4. Are there any sucky saboteur thoughts running through my head? => clear them up
5. Can I create a less procrastinogenic environment? => do it
6. Can I gamify this? => do it
7. GET IT DONE

I've created a printable graphic for you with these seven steps which you can download on my website, coachkramer.org.

Print it, hang it above your desk, and go do some amazing shit.

You're welcome.

Else a.k.a. Coach Kramer

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!