“A complete treatment of procrastination must address the underlying blocked needs that cause a person to resort to procrastination. The Now Habit starts with a new definition: Procrastination is a mechanism for coping with the anxiety associated with starting or completing any task or decision. From this definition it follows that those most vulnerable to procrastination are those who feel the most threatened by difficulty in starting a project, criticism, failure, and the loss of other opportunities that may result from committing to one project.”

~ Neil Fiore from *The Now Habit*

You ever procrastinate?

Me, too. In fact, I *totally* procrastinated on writing this Note!!! (Seriously. Hehehehe. :)

If you ever find yourself procrastinating more than you’d like, I *highly* recommend the book. It was one of the first books I read on my Kindle and I highlighted nearly the whole thing. It’s PACKED with great Big Ideas and I’m excited to share some of my favorites with you!

No need to procrastinate. Let’s jump right in. :)

**FEARS & UNPRODUCTIVE FORMS OF RELIEF**

“What are the deep inner fears that cause us to seek such unproductive forms of relief? Dr. Theodore Rubin in his book *Compassion and Self-Hate* suggests that it is the fear of failure, the fear of being imperfect (perfectionism), and the fear of impossible expectations (being overwhelmed) that prevent us from acting on and attaining humanly possible goals and relationships. Having a fear of failure means you believe that even the smallest error could be evidence that you are a worthless and awful person. Having a fear of being imperfect means that it is difficult for you to accept yourself as you are—imperfect and, therefore, perfectly human—and so you interpret any criticism, rejection, or judgment by others as a threat to your very tenuous grasp on perfection. Having a fear of impossible expectations means fearing that even after you’ve worked hard and achieved the goals set for you, your only reward will be continually higher and more difficult goals to achieve, with no rest and no time to savor your achievements.”

So much to discuss there, eh?!? Let’s focus on the fear of being perfect and the threat of overwhelm.

First, perfectionism. I used to be a poster child for perfectionism. In fact, it was so bad that I can vividly remember sitting in my cubicle at Arthur Andersen at the beginning of my career 13 years ago folding a letter to a client and worrying about whether or not the folds were equally spaced apart and that the stamp was on just right. Yowsers. Almost surreal to look back at that!

Fiore provides us with this powerful equation: “Perfectionistic demands lead to—> fear of failure—> PROCRASTINATION—> self-criticism—> anxiety and depression—> loss of confidence—> greater fear of failure which leads to—> stronger need to use..."
PROCRASTINATION as a temporary escape. Procrastination does not start the pattern. From the perspective of the Now Habit, procrastination follows perfectionistic or overwhelming demands and a fear that even minor mistakes will lead to devastating criticism and failure.

Brilliant. It’s helpful to see perfectionistic demands as the root of our procrastination problem and we might want to remind ourselves of Maslow’s wisdom (see Notes) that: “There are no perfect human beings! Persons can be found who are good, very good indeed, in fact, great. There do in fact exist creators, seers, sages, saints, shakers, and movers... even if they are uncommon and do not come by the dozen. And yet these very same people can at times be boring, irritating, petulant, selfish, angry, or depressed. To avoid disillusionment with human nature, we must first give up our illusions about it.”

Now, overwhelm. My favorite thought on this comes from Tal Ben-Shahar’s great book Happier (see Notes) where he talks about finding your “stretch zone” right in between your panic/overwhelm zone and your comfort zone. It’s healthy to stretch ourselves but we don’t wanna put ourselves into panic zones! :)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the science of this in his great book Flow (see Notes). He says this: “In all the activities people in our study reported engaging in, enjoyment comes at a very specific point: whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities. Playing tennis, for instance, is not enjoyable if the two opponents are mismatched. The less skilled player will feel anxious, and the better player will feel bored. The same is true for every other activity... Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act.”

So, let’s explore some more Big Ideas on how to chillax a bit, drop the whole perfectionistic demands and find our flow!

**VICTIM/PROCRASTINATOR? YOUR CALL**

“Certainly others are frequently in positions of power to affect you and your job, and they might even try to judge your work or your skills. But they can never make you into a victim or a procrastinator. Only you can do that.”

This is Big. Super Big. (Technically speaking, of course. :)

It’s REALLY easy to fall into victim-mode where we blame those around us for our problems and look for rescuers to bail us out. By far *the* best framework I’ve seen to address this issue is found in my friend David Emerald’s GREAT little book, The Power of TED. Please check out the Notes for a quick look at the model, but know that there’s a BIG difference between being victimized—which we ALL are at times (from being abused as children or cut off on the way to work) and being a victim.

Too often we think that being victimized DETERMINES our victimhood. But it doesn’t. We ALWAYS have a choice as to how we interpret an event and it’s REALLY (!!!) important we make that choice wisely.

So, if you’re currently feeling persecuted by people or circumstances in your life, take a moment to step back and see that between the challenges and your response there’s a gap. You wanna step in there and ask yourself how you can create the best response to the situation and avoid falling into the habits of complaining, criticizing, blaming and all that other not-so-fun stuff of victimville.

Why is this so important? Check out the Notes on Learned Optimism for the research on “learned helplessness” and the fact that when we assume the role of disempowered/helpless victim we dramatically increase our likelihood of being depressed/sick/tired/etc.

As Fiore says: “The change in my feelings at that moment was quite dramatic. Stress was
replaced with purposeful action; a sense of victimhood was transformed into empowerment.

**WHAT’RE YOU DOING WITH YOUR TIME?**

“Maintaining your own record for a few days will give you a pretty good estimate of how you spend your time. As you review a typical week’s activities you can total the amount of time spent on the phone, reading the mail, eating, socializing, working, and so forth. This will reveal patterns that you may wish to change and others that you wish to encourage or start earlier in your day.”

Have you ever kept a log of how you spend your time? It’s a *really* powerful way to bring awareness to your routines. The simple act of logging your behavior dramatically alters it! You’ll wanna check out the book for all the Big Ideas Fiore has on how we can leverage this simple yet effective practice.

For now, think about keeping track of your day and see if you can notice the events that precede negative habits. Simply knowing what events trigger the negative habits is a huge tool in switching to more productive activities.

And, remember: “With some record of your current behavior and thoughts, you’ll know where to take corrective action. Without a record it’s almost impossible to learn from past mistakes. Think back to last week. Do you know what you did, how much time was lost, and what you were feeling that led you to procrastinate? Probably not. That’s why I strongly encourage you to make some record of your activities and thoughts or use the procrastination log. It provides a system to make it easier for you to gain control of your time and your behavior patterns.”

**WALKING ACROSS A SOLID BOARD**

“To better understand how you learned to procrastinate, I invite you to use your imagination and to accept for a few minutes a metaphor in which the test, job, or task in your life is to walk a board. Situation A. The task before you is to walk a solid board that is thirty feet long, four inches thick, and one foot wide. You have all the physical, mental, and emotional abilities necessary to perform this task. You can carefully place one foot in front of the other, or you can dance, skip, or leap across the board. You can do it. No problem. Take a minute to close your eyes, relax, and imagine yourself in that situation. Notice how you feel about this task. Are you scared or blocked in any way? Do you feel any need to procrastinate? Fear of failing or making a mistake cannot be an issue here, but you might find that you delay starting out of a need to assert your independence and to resist being asked to do even a simple task such as walking a board. Situation B. Now imagine that the task is just the same, to walk a board thirty feet long and one foot wide, and you have the same abilities; only now the board is suspended between two buildings 100 feet above the pavement. Look across to the other end of the board and contemplate beginning your assignment. What do you feel? What are you thinking about? What are you saying to yourself? Take a moment to notice how your reactions in this situation differ from those you had in situation A. Notice how rapidly your feelings about the task change when the height of the board changes and the consequences of falling are greater.”

That’s awesome.

Isn’t it amazing how often we raise a board up in the air and freak ourselves out?!

Fiore continues the scene by having us imagine the board catching on fire on our end. Then what do we do?!! We do *whatever* we need to, to get to the other end, eh?!? Unfortunately, that’s how we can live our lives at times. Procrastinating to the last minute and then making a frantic dash.

He suggests a better way: Ideally, we can reduce the fears through more effective self-talk and lower the board back down to the ground or, at the very least, create a virtual safety net a few feet below the board so at least we don’t think we’ll fall to our death!
ONE SMALL CORRECTIVE STEP

“I taught him how to catch the early signs of depression about lost opportunities, reminding himself to say, ‘Yes, they’re in the past. Too bad; nothing I can do now about that. But what can I do now?’ He then practiced rapidly turning his attention toward one, small corrective step he could take in the present moment.”

Lao Tzu would agree. Check out the Note on the Tao te Ching where he says: “Prevent trouble before it arises. Put things in order before they exist. The giant pine tree grows from a tiny sprout. The journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet.”

Let’s catch ourselves early on when we find ourselves ruminating about (supposed) lost opportunities, realize it’s all in the past and ask ourselves: “What small step can I take NOW so I can create the future I’m so excited about as I enjoy this moment I’m so blessed to have?!?”

Let’s get specific.

I’m stressed about this at the moment: ____________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

In this moment, I can take this specific step: ______________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

(Sweet. Now take it. :)

“HAVE TO” TO CHOICE

“You do have a choice. You don’t have to want to do the task, nor do you have to love it. But if you prefer it to the consequences of not doing it, you can decide to commit to it wholeheartedly. Once you decide you’re going to the office party, the gas station, or the gift shop, it makes sense for you to assert more positively and powerfully (like the powerful adult you are) that ‘I am going to the store; I will be at the dentist’s at 3:00 P.M.; I am going to traffic court this morning.’”

This is another REALLY Big Idea.

We need to watch how often we use “have to” and realize that every time we say “I have to” we’re effectively diminishing our power. Not a good idea.

Seneca (see Notes on Letters from a Stoic) says: “There is nothing the wise man does reluctantly.”

While Carlos Castaneda (see Notes on The Wheel of Time) tells us: “We hardly ever realize that we can cut anything out of our lives, anytime, in the blink of an eye.”

Are you throwing “I have to...” around a lot these days? Let’s play a game and see how often we say that phrase and step into a more empowered position, shall we?!?

REPLACEMENT THOUGHTS

“Replace ‘I have to’ with ‘I choose to.’
Replace ‘I must finish’ with ‘When can I start?’
Replace ‘This project is so big and important’ with ‘I can take one small step.’
Replace ‘I must be perfect’ with ‘I can be perfectly human.’
Replace ‘I don’t have time to play’ with “I must take time to play.”

Brilliant. Which one of those replacement thoughts resonates with you the most?

Now a good time to start swapping out the less empowering thoughts for rockin’ ones? :)
DEMANDING PERFECTION?

“If you demand of yourself a perfect presentation, a project that is beyond criticism, perfect adherence to a diet, or a spotless home, you are setting yourself up for defeat and inevitable self-criticism. The more perfectionist and self-critical you are, the harder it is to start on a project that you already know will never be quite good enough. Holding on to an image of perfection will make you afraid of seeing what your real product will look like, it will keep you from preparing for failure with a plan that helps you bounce back, and it will increase your tendency to abandon your project when confronted with a normal problem in the developmental process. Ironically, being a perfectionist and criticizing yourself about mistakes makes failures more likely and worse.”

That’s fantastic.

And reminds of Joshua Rosenthal’s brilliant book *Integrative Nutrition*—which is easily the best book on nutrition I’ve read. (Check out the Notes and get the book if you’re feelin’ it!)

Joshua has a school where they discuss the pros and cons of EVERY diet plan out there and I love his recommended diet, the 90/10 Diet.

He says this: “Since I’m not very much into the rules, this diet has only one rule. And even that rule is flexible. The rule is that 90% of the time you eat what is healthy for you, and 10% of the time you eat whatever you feel like eating.”

There’s something REALLY powerful when we chillax a bit (or a lot as the case may be) and pursue excellence and our greatest lives without the stress of NEEDING. TO. BE. PERFECT. ALL. THE. TIME. Gasp. :)

ACCEPT SO-CALLED MISTAKES

“Replace demands for perfect work with acceptance of (not resignation to) your human limits. Accept so-called mistakes (really feedback) as part of a natural learning process. You need self-compassion rather than self-criticism to support your courageous efforts at facing the unavoidable risks of doing real, imperfect work rather than dreaming of the perfect, completed project. You’ll want to be especially gentle with yourself as you recognize that, as a novice, you must go through awkward first steps before you achieve the assurance of a master. As you learn to expect and accept imperfect early steps on your projects, you’ll build in the persistence of a producer, and you’ll be better prepared to bounce back because you’ll have a safety net of compassion.”

Genius.

Reminds me of Michael Beckwith in his great book *Spiritual Liberation* (see Notes) where he says: “A conscious realization of our innate oneness with the Ineffable does not mean that we will never make a mistake again. Even enlightened beings burn their bagels once in a while. It’s important to maintain a sense of humor because this is how you will stop being afraid of making a mistake. You’ll make some, but so what? That’s why they’re called mis-takes. Humor relaxes the uptight ego. You get a new cue from your inner Self and simply say, ‘I missed my cue, so let’s do a second take.’ Your willingness to take the risk of making a mistake is actually an expression of courage and a willingness to grow from them. Mistakes are about getting the blessing in the lesson and the lesson in the blessing.”

Love that.

How are you interpreting your “mistakes”?

I say we laugh the next time we “burn a bagel” and let’s remember Fiore’s wisdom:
PROCRASTINATOR—> PRODUCER

“Each time you choose to switch your energy from your procrastination self-talk to the language of the producer, you are wiring in a new track of brain cells—a new neural pathway in your brain. After you switch from the old path to the new several times, the new associations will strengthen, becoming easier to initiate, while the old ones will atrophy. Each time you make a conscious decision to create safety for yourself and to speak the language of the producer, you will be unlearning the habits of a procrastinator while strengthening the new healthy habits of a producer.”

I love the idea of “neuroplasticity”—the fact that we can literally RE-WIRE our brains.

In her GREAT book, The How of Happiness (see Notes), Sonja Lyubomirsky tells us the same thing: "All that is required to become an optimist is to have the goal and to practice it. The more you rehearse optimistic thoughts, the more 'natural' and 'ingrained' they will become. With time they will be part of you, and you will have made yourself into an altogether different person.”

So, let’s have fun shifting from procrastinator to producer and KNOW that every time we make the shift we’re re-grooving our consciousness in powerful ways!

Here’s to the power of the Now Habit!

About the Author of “The Now Habit”

NEIL FIORE

Neil Fiore, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist, trainer and author of four books. Dr. Fiore, a former president of The Northern California Society of Clinical Hypnosis, has conducted training at the Esalen Institute, California School of Professional Psychology, Summit Hospital, Smithsonian Institute, Levi Strauss, UCSF and Stanford and has attended seminars led by Dr. Milton H. Erickson. Selected by Boardroom Reports as one of their “Top Ten Self-Help Gurus,” Dr. Fiore is firmly established as one of America’s top productivity experts. Dr. Fiore is also the author of The Now Habit: A Strategic Program for Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Guilt-Free Play and Awaken Your Strongest Self: Break Free of Stress, Inner Conflict, and Self-Sabotage. He continues to run seminars and training programs that combine the use of hypnosis and other therapeutic devices to obtain peak performance and productivity. Learn more at NeilFiore.com!

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Brian Johnson is a lover of wisdom (aka a “Philosopher”) and a passionate student of life who’s committed to inspiring and empowering millions of people to live their greatest lives as he studies, embodies and shares the universal truths of optimal living. He harts his job.