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organization

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Achieving That Resolution: Tips for Avoiding Procrastination in 2009



I hope that all of you had a very enjoyable and restful Holiday Season! For many of you, your Holiday is not yet over. But for some, you are turning your thoughts toward the New Year and, of course, new resolutions. Our resolutions tend to reflect high priority goals we have for our health, our relationships, our finances or our careers.

But New Year's resolutions are often referred to as "promises sure NOT to be kept." This notion highlights our tendency to procrastinate when it comes to those big goals we set to be achieved after January 1st of each year. Why does the brain procrastinate when faced with tasks as important as those contained in New Year's resolutions? Is there anything we can do to increase the likelihood that our brains will follow-through this year on these important goals?

What is Procrastination?

Researcher Piers Steel at the University of Calgary describes procrastination as "voluntarily delaying an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay." Almost all of us procrastinate at some time in our life. But 15-20% of Americans routinely put-off activities that would be better accomplished immediately--leading to financial problems, poor health, fractured relationships and failed careers. Because such a large number of people suffer from the consequences of consistent procrastination, researchers have worked diligently to understand procrastination and its biological roots. Though in its infancy, procrastination research may provide us clues to increase our chances of achieving those New Year's resolutions.

Why Do We Procrastinate?

Early research suggests two primary reasons we procrastinate: task aversiveness and temporal delay. Task aversiveness simply means we find the task that needs to be done unpleasant, best and painful or threatening at worst. We feel uneasy about an activity or we simply wish to avoid discomfort. The aversions can be quite complex. For example, we may fear failing at the activity, making a mistake at the activity or even fear succeeding because success might bring us additional tasks! Our brains are essentially engineered to survive, pursue pleasure, and avoid pain.

Early research suggests two primary reasons we procrastinate: task aversiveness and temporal delay. Task aversion simply means we find the task unpleasant, painful, or threatening. Temporal delay refers to the amount of time before a project's due date and the effect of that date on actual completion of the task.

We are powerfully programmed to avoid dangerous, threatening, disagreeable, boring, obnoxious, irritating and distressing stimulus. The more unpleasant or threatening we perceive the task, the more likely we are to delay doing it, particularly if we can substitute more pleasant or agreeable tasks in its place. In today's world of instantly accessed products and entertainments, how hard is that?

Temporal delay refers to the amount of time before a project's due date and the effect of that date on actual completion of the task. As a rule of thumb, the farther away the "due date" for the task is, the higher the likelihood of procrastination. This phenomenon is based in the brain's reward system. The brain secretes the largest amount of dopamine, our body's "pleasure chemical," in anticipation of an award being obtained rather than upon the actual receipt of the reward itself. Thus, the closer one gets to obtaining the accomplished goal, the higher the biological reward and resulting motivation to complete the task. However, rewards to be achieved "in the future" provide little or no dopamine bump and fail to support the delay of gratification necessary to stick with a task long term.

How Does it Work?

Let's apply these two principles to one of the most common of New Year's resolutions: losing weight. Right away, we can see that task aversiveness will be a problem. Losing weight requires a decrease in caloric intake and an increase in caloric expenditure. That translates for most people into giving up more of the foods they really love to eat, and in the quantities they enjoy eating them. In addition, they must increase physical activity which may be irritating, uncomfortable, unpleasant or downright painful!

In addition, nutritionists recommend that we approach weight loss slowly--with 2-5 pounds a month being a desirable weight-loss pace. That means our weight loss goals will probably not be realized for months and maybe even in the 2009 calendar year! Therefore, temporal delay will also be a problem as our goal achievement date is too far away to give us much of a dopamine boost. Right away, we can see that our brains will actually be biased FOR procrastination in this example and will probably be our biggest obstacle toward achieving our goals.

What Can We Do?

I recognize that telling you that your brain is going to be one of your biggest obstacles to achieving your 2009 resolutions may not be encouraging--at first. However, I am a firm believer that knowledge is power and I believe that knowing that your brain is going to provide this resistance will actually prepare you to overcome it. Often in my experience, understandable biological processes are cast as "weaknesses" of character,

morals or conscience when, in reality, they have lived with cells, survival, and human brain development aged by this information but use it to "outsmart" you desire.

to do with character and much to do. In other words, don't get discouraged by your own brain and achieve the success

Here are three things researchers recommend that can help you use your brain's natural function to overcome the tendency to procrastinate:

1. Help you use your brain's natural function to overcome the tendency to procrastinate:

1. Implementation Intentions

Peter Gollwitzer of New York University and the University of Konstanz in Germany recommend specifying where and when you will perform a specific behavior. For example, rather than resolving generically to "exercise more," in 2009, "Gollwitzer urges using the specific goal statement: "I will walk 2 miles on my neighborhood street tomorrow at 7:30 a.m." A 2008 research study at Hofstra University found that setting these specific daily goals makes it eight times more likely that you will follow through on your commitment and not procrastinate. While breaking down your resolution to daily activities will involve some effort, an eight-fold increase in achievement seems well worth the effort.

2. University of Konstanz in Germany recommends specifying where and when you will perform a specific behavior. For example, in 2009, "Gollwitzer urges using the neighborhood street tomorrow at 7:30 a.m." A 2008 research study at Hofstra University found that setting these specific daily goals makes it eight times more likely that you will follow through on your commitment and not procrastinate. While breaking down your resolution to daily activities will involve some effort, an eight-fold increase in achievement seems well worth the effort.

2. Smart Scheduling

Set interim deadlines for parts of long-term projects or calendar alongside other tasks. When possible, projects are due by moving up the due date and breaking them into manageable chunks. For example, "I will lose 1.5 pounds per day and completing 20 minutes of aerobic exercise each Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday." In a study done at M.I.T., executives scored better in both completion and performance on tasks whose deadlines were imposed by others and who did not break down the task. It appears that both implementation intention and smart scheduling take advantage of the brain's natural reward system by building in smaller accomplishments and therefore more frequent "reward anticipation" than vague, sin-

3. Set interim deadlines for parts of long-term projects or calendar alongside other tasks. When possible, projects are due by moving up the due date and breaking them into manageable chunks. For example, "I will lose 1.5 pounds per day and completing 20 minutes of aerobic exercise each Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday." In a study done at M.I.T., executives scored better in both completion and performance on tasks whose deadlines were imposed by others and who did not break down the task. It appears that both implementation intention and smart scheduling take advantage of the brain's natural reward system by building in smaller accomplishments and therefore more frequent "reward anticipation" than vague, sin-

3. Just Get Started

The anticipation of the dreaded task is often far worse than the task itself so Timothy Pychyl of the Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada advises procrastinators to "just get started." In a 2000 study with college students (statistically, some of the worst procrastinators in any demographic group), he found that when students actually began work on the task, their perception of the task changed dramatically and many reported actually enjoying the task. So once your implementation intentions are set and you've smart scheduled your resolutions--whatever they may be!

4. The anticipation of the dreaded task is often far worse than the task itself so Timothy Pychyl of the Procrastination Research Group at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada advises procrastinators to "just get started." In a 2000 study with college students (statistically, some of the worst procrastinators in any demographic group), he found that when students actually began work on the task, their perception of the task changed dramatically and many reported actually enjoying the task. So once your implementation intentions are set and you've smart scheduled your resolutions--whatever they may be!

Want More?

- The idea for this article was stimulated by Trisha Gura's article in the December 2008/January 2009 issue of Scientific American Mind: "I'll Do It Tomorrow."
- Timothy Pychyl of the Procrastination Research Group has a blog at: <http://blogs.psychologytoday.com/blog/dont-delay>.
- Psychologist and therapist William Knaus works with habitual procrastinators and published: *The Procrastination Workbook* in 2002 (New Harbinger Publications).
- My procrastinating friends and colleagues recommend: *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It* by Jane B. Burka and Lenora M. Yeun (Doubleday Press 2004).



UDO MOURNS THE LOSS OF TERRY LONG: A TRUE ORIGINAL



On December 13, 2008, Terry Long died of heart failure in New York City. Terry was one of the original presenters for The Upside Down Organization when we began our non-profit training company in 2005. All of us at UDO mourn his loss. For those of you that had the pleasure of knowing Terry or attending one of his workshops, you know what a unique individual he was and the energy that he brought not only to his presentations, but also to his audience.

Terry began his career with our parent organization, The Children's Guild, in 1994. At the time of his death, Terry served as the Integrated Arts Coordinator for all of our schools across Maryland. Terry believed strongly in the Arts and the benefit of exposing children to a wide variety of artistic expression and teaching them to express them-

selves through the Arts. Terry was developing a special expertise in how to integrate traditional academic lessons with the arts to provide an novel learning experience for students that improved engagement, encouraged participation and improved retention. Terry had created workshops on Arts Integration and presenting them at national education conferences including the Learning Brain Expo in San Francisco, California and more recently in November at the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) 36th Annual Conference in Vancouver, Washington.

An award-winning stage performer and director, Terry brought a dramatic flair to his presentations that made audience members sit-up and take notice. Frank Kros, President of The Upside Down Organization, comments, "What I will always remember about Terry was his passion for being a presenter and his commitment to learning everything he could about presenting, to the brain, and how children learn." Terry was working on his certification in Applied Educational Neuroscience through Jensen Learning Corporation in San Diego, California and was close to achieving this important goal for himself. He was also preparing a new workshop on the Arts and the Brain to be added to our UDO line-up of courses. On top of his workload and his intense involvement in the Baltimore theatre scene as a sought-after director, the fact that Terry pursued his quest to be a great staff developer to help adult help kids demonstrate the kind of child advocacy he truly was. Perhaps more than any other group, children will be the lesser for Terry's absence.

Terry spent his last hours doing the things he loved, in a city he loved, with people he loved. He had organized a bus trip to New York for our Guild staff and their families to see the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center and the window displays along 5th Avenue's department stores. He was the chief escort and entertainer for the group as he loved New York City--particularly at Christmas. He was cracking jokes, singing Christmas carols and covering block of New York City streets with his signature red and white striped scarf.

UDO says goodbye to a respected colleague and treasured friend. Terry will be deeply missed.

UPSIDE DOWN WORKSHOP: A "MUST-HAVE" For Child-Serving Professionals
Who Want to Learn the Best Ways to REACH and TEACH
the Non-Traditional Learner!

Stocking the Toolbox: Brain-Compatible Strategies for Challenging Behaviors

Presented by

Frank Kros, MSW, JD

Jan. 23, 2009

Hilton Garden Inn-Columbia

8241 Snowden River Parkway | Columbia, MD |

[\[Directions\]](#)

9p.m.-4:00p.m.

CEU credits: 6

Early Bird Registration rate : \$139 (until 1/13)

Registration rate: \$159 (after 1/13)

Group rate: \$119 (three or more registrants)

Explore the inner workings of the brains of children who do not learn in a traditional fashion. The specific challenges of **Oppositional Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Depression, Anxiety, Learned Helplessness, Asperger's Syndrome, Sensory Integration Disorder and AD/HD** are covered in detail. For each challenge, the symptoms, causes and effective interventions are explained.

If you're ready to restock your toolbox for effectively helping these non-traditional learners, this workshop will bring you up-to-date on the latest successful insights and practices.

[\[REGISTER NOW\]](#)

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Guide to upcoming events and The
Upside Down Organization workshops:

Jan. 16

Texas Network of Youth Services (TNOYS)

"Rethinking Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD): What Works, What Doesn't and Why"

Presented by Frank J. Kros, MSW, JD
Austin, TX

Jan. 19

Learning Brain Expo

"See, Experience, Tell"

Presented by Anade Gea Coombs, MA
Newport Beach, CA

Jan. 23

OPEN WORKSHOP: "Stocking the Toolbox: Brain-Compatible Strategies for Challenging Behaviors"

Presented by Frank J. Kros, MSW, JD
Columbia, MD



Feb.11

[ConnectionsCount!FamilyFocusProfessionalDevelopmentConference](#)
"LeadershipandtheModernMind:AnUpsideDownLookatWhatitTakestoGetOtherstoChange"

PresentedbyFrankJ.Kros,MSW,JD
LakeCharles,LA

"GivingAFishaBath:TheUntoldStoryoftheAdolescentMind"

PresentedbyFrankJ.Kros,MSW,JD
LakeCharles,LA

Feb.17-19

[TheNationalAt-RiskEducationNetwork\(NAREN\)2009Conference](#)
"GivingAFishaBath:TheUntoldStoryoftheAdolescentMind"

PresentedbyFrankJ.Kros,MSW,JD
PanamaCity,FL

"WhoseChildIsThisAnyway:PowerToolsforFosteringAcademicSuccessinOurFosterChildren"

PresentedbyShawnReagleKros,LCSW-C
PanamaCity,FL

"RethinkingAttention-Deficit/HyperactivityDisorder(AD/HD):WhatWorks,WhatDoesn'tandWhy"

PresentedbyHeatherHiggins,LCSW-C
PanamaCity,FL

Feb.20

[OPENWORKSHOP: "BeyondPoverty:Brain-InspiredWaystoUnderstandandRespondtoPoverty"](#)

PresentedbyFrankJ.Kros,MSW,JD
Baltimore,MD

Feb.24

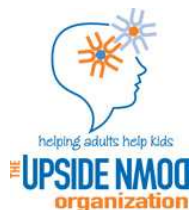
[Alliance41stAnnualSeniorLeadershipConference](#)
"LeadingtheGreatestChange:ImplementingBrain-InspiredProblemSolvinginYourOrganization"

PresentedbyFrankJ.Kros,MSW,JD
St.PeteBeach,FL

HAPPY NEW YEAR FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT UDO!

Wishing you a happy, healthy and successful 2009!
We hope to see you soon!

--- The Upside Down Organization



[The Upside Down Organization \(UDO\)](#), formerly The Institute for Transformation Education, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the education and advocacy of Transformation Education, an organizational philosophy and operating system for child-serving organizations. UDO offers professional development experiences, mentoring services, learning tools and organizational branding that help improve the skills of people who educate, parent, guide and care for young people.

Visit [UDO online](http://UDOonline), contact 410-444-5415 or e-mail info@upsidedownorganization.org.