


# Understanding Procrastination and Conquering Your To-Do Lists

Sarah Fischer, PhD  
UNMC Wellness team: Director of Wellness Education and Research



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## Objectives

1. Identify types of situations that are likely to trigger procrastination as well as the cognitive and emotional factors involved.
2. Apply time management techniques to improve patient outcomes and personal well-being.
3. Discuss the relationship between procrastination, workplace stress, and burnout.

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## The UNMC Wellness Team

- Steve Wengel, MD: Assistant vice chancellor for campus wellness
- Sarah Fischer, PhD: Director of wellness research & education
- Priya Gearin, MD: Director of wellness programming



**What we do:**

- Provide wellness programming and education
- Consult on wellness-related research projects
- Consult on wellness-related campus initiatives
- Serve as wellness navigators, linking to other resources on and off campus
- Teach medical students and residents on maintaining personal and professional wellbeing

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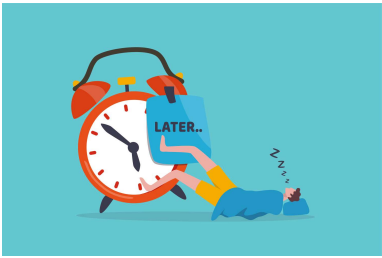
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**What is procrastination?**

- Latin prefix *pro-*, meaning "forward," and *crastinus*, "of tomorrow"
- Putting off a task that needs to be done in a particular time frame

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**We all do it!**

- Avoid labeling
- Sometimes we procrastinate because it's functional to do so
- When does this become a problem?
  - Missing deadlines
  - Missing opportunities
  - Getting in the way of life goals (e.g. financial, social, recreational)
  - Getting in the way of work effectiveness (e.g. getting reprimanded, not being prepared for important work tasks, harming relationships with coworkers)
  - Creating emotional distress and overwhelm
  - Essentially, when the consequences outweigh the benefits

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**Misconceptions about procrastination**

- Many believe that procrastination is a result of:
  - "laziness"
  - carelessness
  - Poor time management
  - Lack of investment
- Today's goal: investigate the **real** reasons we're tempted to put things off, and how to address these barriers to getting things done and prioritize our to-do lists effectively

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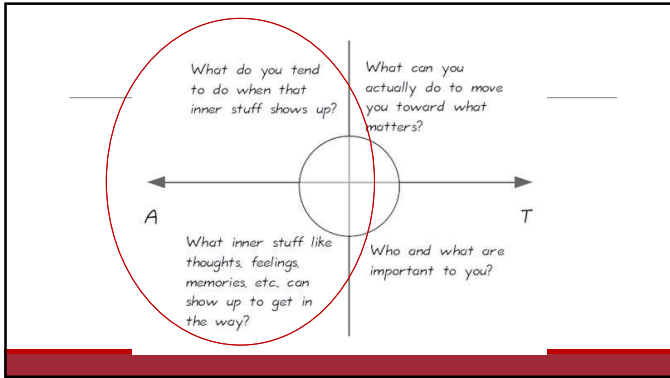
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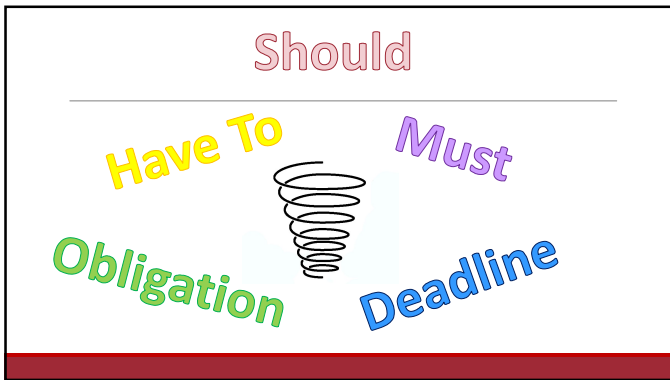
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**Should and Must statements**

**DON'T  
'SHOULD'  
YOURSELF**

Telling yourself that you/things should be a certain way.

*I shouldn't make mistakes like that again!*

*I should be able to do this!*

*I shouldn't feel overwhelmed by this!*

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What Leads to "Shoulding" on Ourselves?

Imposter Syndrome

Perfectionism

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Imposter Syndrome



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What Impostor Syndrome Feels Like



Imposter syndrome

- Feeling inadequate and incompetent despite contradictory evidence.
- Most common among high achievers
- Presents most strongly during transitions
- Affects both genders
- Can make it feel intimidating to complete work, as if you do it wrong you reveal yourself to be the imposter

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Name famous person with Imposter Syndrome \_\_\_\_\_

"I still sometimes feel like a loser kid in high school and I just have to pick myself up and tell myself that I'm a superstar every morning so that I can get through this day and be for my fans what they need for me to be."

• HBO concert documentary, 2011



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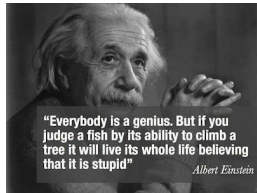
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Name this famous person \_\_\_\_\_

The exaggerated esteem in which my lifework is held makes me very ill at ease. I feel compelled to think of myself as an involuntary swindler.



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PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism: The need to be or appear to be perfect.

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## Why is perfectionism not helpful?

Perfectionism correlates with depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other mental health problems.



Perfectionism is a type of cognitive distortion, or thinking error, called black and white or all-or-nothing thinking.

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If you are thinking “I’m either perfect or a failure, there is no in between,” you’ll have the following problems:

- Not attempting tasks that you think it will be difficult to complete perfectly
- Procrastinating, telling yourself not to start a task **until you know you can do it perfectly**
- Only focusing on the end-product and ignoring the process/the learning along the way
- Not considering a task as complete until it’s perfect, **sometimes handing things in late or not at all**
- Taking an excessive amount of time to complete tasks



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In short, in addition to harming your mental health, perfectionism can actually reduce your productivity and success.

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## Model of Balancing Emotions

- Drive System: Our motivational system, helping us move forward and achieve new things (shoulds and perfectionism).
- Threat System: Our survival system, helping us assess and react to threats in our environment (imposter syndrome and procrastination).
- Soothe System: Calming, counteracts the threat and drive systems. Allows us to rest and recharge and reset our nervous system so we can complete tasks.

Adapted from Gilbert (2010)

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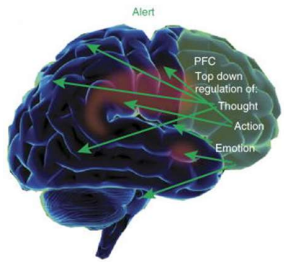
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## Top-Down Response (Soothe System)

- Carefully assess the situation
- Time to think about your response
- Consciously decide how to react
- Take action

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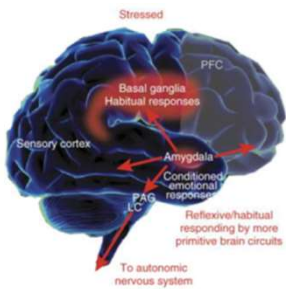
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## Bottom-Up Response (Threat System)

- First Impression
- No time to think
- Reaction may be unconscious
- Action is automatic

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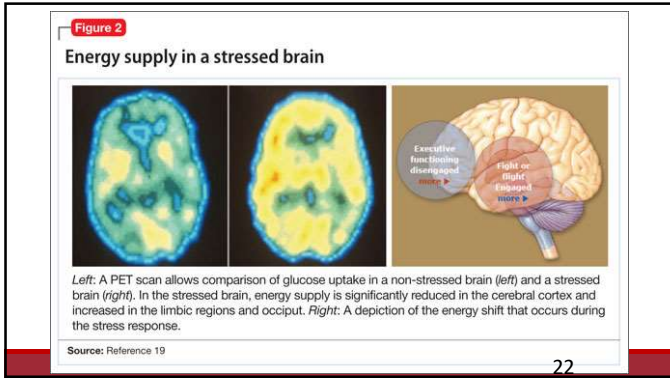
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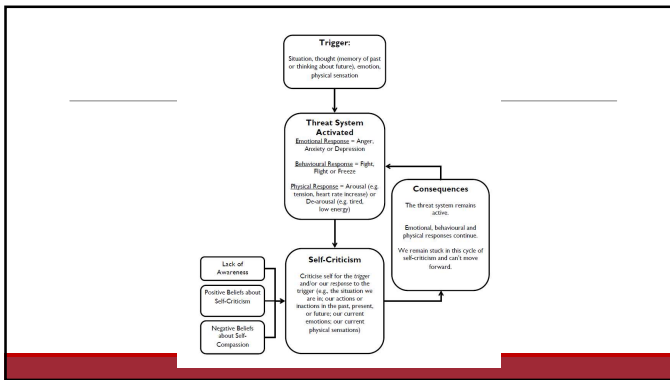
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**Summary: The Problem with Shoulds and Unfair Expectations**

- ⚠️ Fear of failure
- 🧠 Self-doubt
- 🏃 Fear that the effort won't be worth it (perfect=immense effort)
- 💡 Indiscriminate perfectionism
- 😓 Emotional Overwhelm
- 🔥 Self-criticism
- 💡 Shame and threat
- ⚠️ All of the above=unable to focus and complete tasks, especially when this stress is prolonged/ongoing

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### Practical Considerations

Literally too many tasks with too little time	Putting out fires	Unclear where to start	Underestimating how long tasks will take you
Believing you work better under pressure	Perceived obstacles and how to navigate them (magnification)	Lacking opportunities for self-care and rest, leading to fewer mental/emotional resources	Other people being involved
	Feeling isolated/unable to ask for help	Feeling unrewarded for your work	

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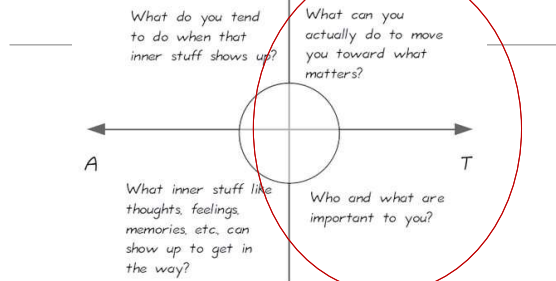
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### Follow your values



Values are what truly matters to you.

- What do you want to stand for?
- What do you want to do with your life?
- What is your part in the big picture?
- You can think of values as your compass, giving you a direction to head, but not a destination.

**Committed Action** is taking effective action, which is guided by our values. Knowing your values is great, but you have to take committed action to live by your values. Sometimes, this means we must do something that is unpleasant or difficult, but if it is in service of our values, it is a committed action.

Values Activity:

- [https://sakai.ohsu.edu/access/content/group/Kathlynn\\_Tutorials/public/Value%20Card%20Sort%20Exercise%20-%20Storyline%20output/story\\_html5.html](https://sakai.ohsu.edu/access/content/group/Kathlynn_Tutorials/public/Value%20Card%20Sort%20Exercise%20-%20Storyline%20output/story_html5.html)

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## Dealing with Common Passengers

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### Imposter Syndrome: Use Your Strengths

[Authentic Happiness | Authentic Happiness \(upenn.edu\)](#)

- Identify your top five personal strengths
- Write them down
- Think about how you already use your strengths each day
- Look for opportunities to use your strengths
- When you are having difficulties completing a task or solving a problem, ask yourself if there's a different approach that would better allow you to use your strengths
- Get your support system in place -- advisors, mentors, friends, partner. They'll remind you of your strengths!



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### Tips for Overcoming Perfectionism- Thoughts



Do not ruminate on your mistakes/flaws while ignoring your successes/strengths

Don't compare yourself to others

Limit self-criticism and practice self-compassion

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### Tips for Overcoming Perfectionism- Actions

Stay flexible and practice acceptance (there will be times that plans change, and there will be times that you make mistakes)

Practice exposure to break patterns of avoidance

Choose what to be a perfectionist about, and what does not need to be perfect

Once you've decided your work is good enough, submit it

Celebrate your successes



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Remember that adequate **complete** work is much better than work that doesn't move you forward at all.

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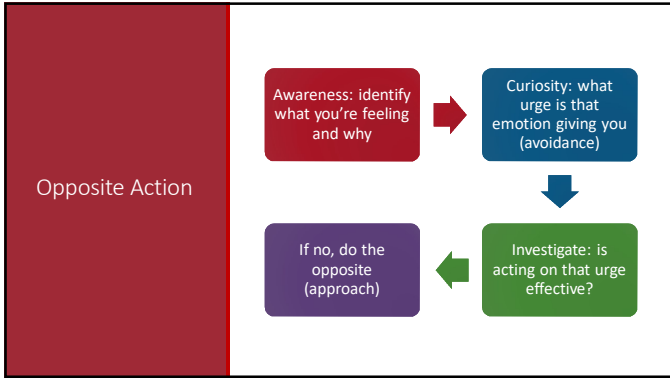
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### Motivation

How people think motivation happens:  
 Motivation → “Great! Let’s do what I need to do!” → Action



How motivation actually happens:  
 “I don’t want to do this/this feels overwhelming” → Identify a reasonable first step that takes a short time → Complete first step → “I did it! That wasn’t so bad. Now I can do/plan the next step → Steady progress → Build confidence and motivation over time

It’s ok to build in some extrinsic motivation!

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### If you think you work better under pressure

Evidence check-in

Remember, increased *efficiency* does not necessarily mean *quality*

It may be easier to do the work when under a task is overdue *and* you may be limiting your potential in terms of quality

Check in with you values

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**Literally too many tasks with too little time:**  
When possible, increase comfort with saying no to new responsibilities (or drop ones that aren't working for you)  
Decide which tasks need detail-oriented attention and which just need to be done  
Negotiate opportunities to complete tasks in a way that works for you



**Putting out fires**  
Be realistic about what you're able to accomplish outside of the pop-up problems  
Avoid all-or-nothing thinking  
Ask for help when indicated  
Have protected task time if possible  
Acceptance and Self-Compassion

### Practical Solutions

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

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### Unclear Where to Start/Underestimating Time Needed

**SMART Goals**

Identify:

- Large Goal (long-term, big project, has a lot of parts, can't just go out and do it)
- Smaller Goal (shorter-term, can be broken down into discrete steps, can see progress in the near future if doing those steps)
- Steps (what am I doing this week/today)

	<b>S</b>	<b>Specific:</b> The goal must be very specific and grounded in something that's significant to you.
	<b>M</b>	<b>Measurable:</b> The goal must have some sort of measurement (days, pounds, miles, etc.).
	<b>A</b>	<b>Achievable:</b> The goal must be realistic and reasonable.
	<b>R</b>	<b>Relevant:</b> The goal must relate to what you're hoping to accomplish.
	<b>T</b>	<b>Time-bound:</b> The goal must have a timeframe and that timeframe must be reasonable.

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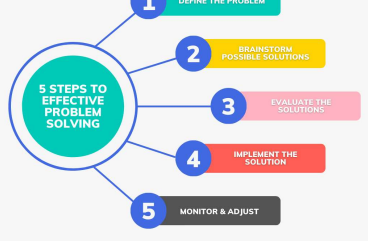
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### Navigating Obstacles

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### Other Helpful Practical Tips



#### 5-minute rule

If it will take 5 minutes or less, do it now.



#### 15-minute rule

When trying to tackle a bigger tasks, work on your current step for 15 minutes. You will either:

- Keep it fresh in your mind
- Make a bit of progress-anything is better than nothing
- Find motivation and keep going

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### Pause and Breathe

#### Focused Breathing:

- Take deep belly breaths
- Count slowly to six as you breathe in
- Pause briefly
- Count slowly to eight as you breathe out
- Pause briefly
- Repeat for 1-5 minutes, depending on time

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### Self-Compassion (Kristen Neff)

- Awareness
- Normalizing
- Kindness
- Alleviation
- Activates the soothe mode

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Day:	__day	__day	__day	__day	__day	__day	__Day
	Kind Day	Critical Day	Kind Day	Critical Day	Kind Day	Critical Day	Kind Day
What positive outcomes occurred?							
What negative outcomes occurred?							
Did you get things done?							
How did you feel?							

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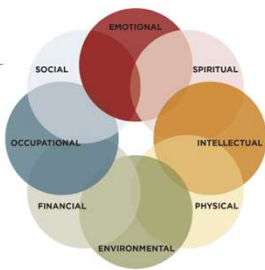
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EIGHT DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS\*

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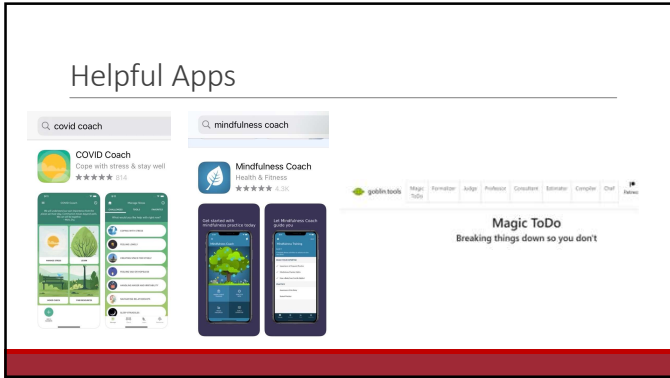
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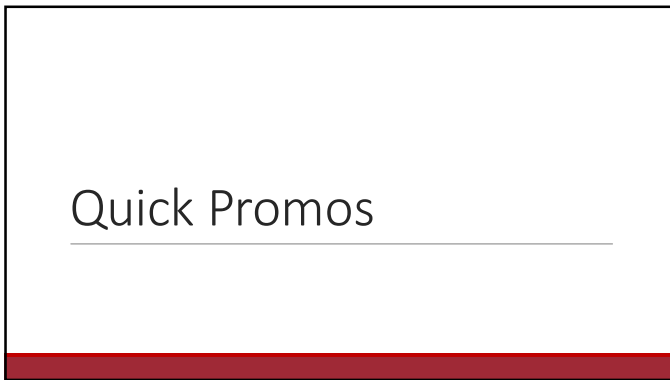
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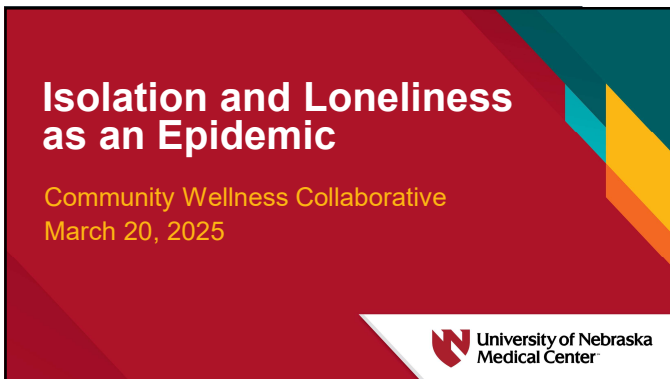
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**Reproductive Psychiatry Clinic**

For those:

1. Trying to conceive
2. Are currently pregnant
3. Are within one year of the postpartum period
4. Premenstrual mood disorders
5. Pregnancy-related loss and trauma

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