

Better Get to Work: Procrastination May Harm Heart Health

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Even with a deadline looming and a pile of work, many people still find themselves wasting time checking social media or reading up on the latest sports scores. For businesses, procrastination can take a serious toll on productivity; for employees, wasting too much time can ruin deadlines as well as relationships.

New evidence suggests that procrastination doesn't just hurt your work, it may also seriously damage your health.

A recent study indicates that chronic procrastination may make people more vulnerable to serious health conditions, like cardiovascular disease and hypertension.

Psychological scientist Fuschia Sirois of Bishop's University in Quebec reports that trait procrastination—that is, a tendency to delay important tasks despite the negative consequences—was significantly associated with having hypertension or cardiovascular disease (HT/CVD) even after controlling for the effects of age, race, educational level, and other personality factors.

Evidence suggests that putting off important tasks causes stress, and this additional stress contributes to

negative psychophysiological impacts on the body which increase our vulnerability for illness. Previous research has linked chronic procrastination to a range of stress-related health problems such as headaches, digestive issues, colds and flus, and insomnia.

Sirois hypothesized that, as you might expect, procrastinators are likely to put off important health behaviors like going to the doctor and getting regular exercise. She also suspected that chronic procrastinators might cope poorly with the constant stress caused by delay.

Sirois identified two harmful coping strategies—behavioral disengagement (avoiding dealing with a looming problem) and self-blame—that might exacerbate stress, potentially contributing to poor health outcomes.

For the study, Sirois recruited a community sample of 182 individuals self-reporting a formal medical diagnosis of either hypertension or cardiovascular disease and a group of 564 healthy controls. All of the participants completed a series of online surveys measuring trait procrastination, coping style, stress, and health outcomes.

The survey results showed that the group that had been diagnosed with either hypertension or cardiovascular disease scored significantly higher on measures for trait procrastination compared to the healthy controls.

In addition, the HT/CVD group showed a stronger association between procrastination and the two maladaptive coping strategies (behavioral disengagement and self-blame) compared to the healthy control group.

“Current theory and evidence linking procrastination to health builds a supportive case for this personality trait as being associated with, and being a vulnerability factor for adjustment to HT/CVD, two related and serious chronic health conditions,” Sirois writes in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*.

Although this study was unable to prove a causal link between chronic procrastination and cardiovascular disease and hypertension, the results reflect previous research findings linking procrastination to potentially serious health issues.

Sirois suggests that one way for chronic procrastinators to reduce stress is by targeting the harsh self-critical thoughts that disrupt adaptive coping.

Another tactic to help fend off the scourge of procrastination may be to change the units of time we use to measure future deadlines.

In a new article published in [*Psychological Science*](#), Neil Lewis Jr. of the University of Michigan and Daphna Oyserman of the University of Southern California found that substituting smaller units of time—90 days instead of 3 months or 48 hours instead of 2 days—can make upcoming events seem more immediate.

When units of time were manipulated to bring important events closer to the forefront psychologically, people reported that they should start taking action significantly earlier, even when future events were

described as being tens of thousands of days away.

In two studies, 162 study participants were asked to imagine themselves preparing for a future event, such as a presentation for work or an exam, which was either days, months or years away.

Those who thought about the time in the smallest possible units (in this case days) imagined that the event would occur much sooner: an average of 30 days sooner when imagined as days rather than months.

A subsequent series of studies found that the time metric also influenced when people were ready to act on their plans. For example, participants said they would start saving for retirement four times sooner when they were told how many days (14,600 days) rather than how many years (40 years) until retirement.

According to Oyserman, this particular trick of time, “may be useful to anyone needing to save for retirement or their children’s college, to start working on a term paper or dissertation, pretty much anyone with long-term goals or wanting to support someone who has such goals.”

References

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Sirois, F. M. (2015). Is procrastination a vulnerability factor for hypertension and cardiovascular disease? Testing an extension of the procrastination–health model. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 1-12. doi: 10.1007/s10865-015-9629-2