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Understanding the Procrastination Cycle

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Meehan Rasch

USC Gould School of Law

and

David A. Rasch

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Understanding the Procrastination Cycle

Meehan Rasch

Legal Research and Writing Fellow, UC Davis School of Law; and

David A. Rasch, PhD

Procrastination is one of the enduring challenges of human existence, as well as one of the chief problems with which law students struggle. Understanding the cycle of procrastination can help law professors and advisors more constructively address students' issues in this area—not to mention our own.

When a student puts off studying or working on an assignment, she experiences a moment of relief. It feels good to procrastinate because, for a while anyway, the procrastinator doesn't have to face the many challenges that legal study presents; on the other hand, it also functions as a disconnect from true engagement with one's work and present purpose. Unfortunately, patterns of putting off work are typically repeated and reinforced, and many law students procrastinate again and again, despite

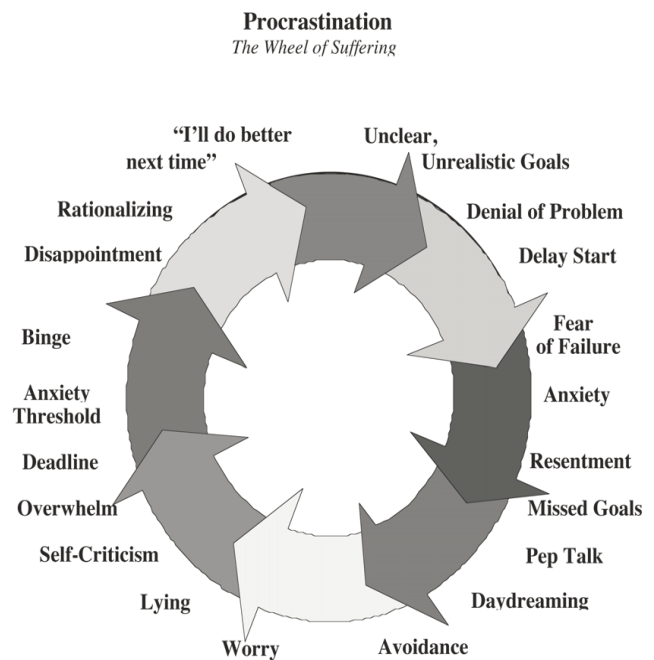
their best intentions.

Procrastinators may castigate themselves as being "lazy," but that label is misleading. Laziness implies a degree of contented relaxation that rarely applies to law students. The procrastination state, on the other hand, is typically very dynamic and uncomfortable on the inside, even if nothing is happening on the outside.

Thinking of procrastination as a cycle or wheel helps one to understand how procrastinators unwittingly create and maintain certain patterns of behavior, and why they then feel unhappy and controlled by that behavior. Although each person's cycle of procrastination is unique, several common features are included on this wheel of suffering. The more times students go around the wheel, the more they reinforce their own behavioral patterns. The steps become grooved and automatic, until eventually the wheel spins without conscious awareness.

Law students with longstanding bad habits are typically unaware of the

mechanisms that control their behavior; they are ignorant of the fact that they are automatically reenacting patterns of avoidance behavior designed to protect them from uncomfortable feelings of anxiety. Daydreaming, forgetfulness, rationalizing, confusion, and distraction are all aspects of this cycle.



“Technology...is a queer thing. It brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other.”

Carrie P. Snow

Quick-fix solutions to long-standing procrastination are as effective as fad diets, especially if those solutions are part of the wheel itself (ex. self-criticism, unrealistic plans, binge writing at deadlines, internal pep talks).

Habits are resilient and efforts toward change must be carefully considered and executed in order to be successful. Law students can jump off the procrastination wheel at any point in the cycle, but it is important to respect the power of these patterns and set expectations and goals accordingly.

Law professors and academic support professionals can help students break the procrastination cycle by pushing students to examine their work habits specifically and objectively, with a spirit of curiosity and self-forgiveness. Many students shown the procrastination wheel above will recognize the patterns as their own. Professors can encourage students with procrastination issues to further notice how they behave day-to-day, considering the following questions:

- What are the things you typically do when you are avoiding your legal studies?

- Do you reward yourself for not working in any obvious or subtle ways? How?
- Do you do anything that makes your legal studying unappealing or aversive?

Advisors should encourage struggling students to begin with small steps that are only mildly uncomfortable because students are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety, overload, resentment, and dread if their goals and expectations push them too far beyond their comfort zones. Understanding the procrastination cycle offers students more power over their patterns, and every victory serves to slow the cycle.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING:

Natalie Goldberg, *WILD MIND: LIVING THE WRITER'S LIFE* 211 (1990).