Meet the Procrastination Monkey

Welcome to this week’s On the Path podcast. I’m Joyce Sherry, York School Dean of Students.

Lately, I’ve been reading a series of posts from one of my favorite bloggers, Tim Urban of Wait But Why. We’ll include a link to the full blog on the website, but for this week’s edition, I’d like to give you an overview of the series I’ve been reading and why it’s of interest for York students and parents. The three posts are titled “Why Procrastinators Procrastinate,” “How to Beat Procrastination,” and “The Procrastination Matrix.” Have I got your attention?

If you’ve never been a procrastinator, well, first of all, more power to you! I’m lucky that I’d label my own brand of procrastination as decidedly minor league. It’s always been my dream to write my weekly posts, whether this podcast, my former blog, or the theatre reviews I used to write, weeks in advance. That way I could save myself the anxiety of last minute scrambling for a topic and the text. But some shiny object always distracts me, and the best I can do is feel proud of myself for submitting my work a day or two before the deadline.

I can just hear the true procrastinators laughing a hearty guffaw at my expense. “Isn’t she cute?” I hear them say. “Her procrastination makes her get her work in ‘only’ a day or two ahead of schedule.” I freely admit that my tolerance for self-induced stress and panic is low. And let me rush to say that I recognize how completely debilitating true procrastination can be. The true procrastinator is as addicted to and disabled by procrastination as is the junkie by his drug.

Years ago, I was talking with a distraught student whose mother was becoming ever more frustrated by his lack of homework completion. Here was clearly a capable fellow. In class, his contribution was sparkling. He had an obvious passion for politics and government, and could debate with anyone for hours. When it came to assignments, though, he could never complete them. According to him, he didn’t even mind doing homework. In fact, he kind of enjoyed it, when he got around to it. But that was the problem. Every day, he got home from school completely confident that he would tackle his work right after he had a snack. Without fail, the snack was accompanied by poking around on the internet to discover what had gone on in the political world that day. He would remind himself that he had that English paper to write, but hey, there were still hours before dinnertime. Surely he could watch a video or two. When dinnertime rolled around, he wasn’t terribly worried; it was still hours before bedtime. That essay would take him only an hour, at most. And he could always do his math, French, science, and history homework during his first period free the next morning. Well, you know the rest of that story, and for many of you, it’s an all-too-familiar one.

So Tim Urban, the blogger I mentioned a minute ago, describes procrastination this way. In our heads, we have the Rational Decision Maker. Sigmund Freud might call this the ego or the Self. When the Rational Decision Maker is at the helm of our minds, things go pretty well. We plan, make good choices about implementing steps to our goals, accurately estimate the time a project will take, and meet our deadlines. This is a lot of prefrontal cortex work, and as you
probably already know, that handy part of our brains isn’t fully developed until we’re in our mid-twenties. A high schooler whose Rational Decision Maker is always at the helm is a very rare bird, indeed. To be honest, it’s rare for the RDM to be always in control no matter what our age. The thing that high schoolers have going for them, though, is the fact that they have external structure in their lives. Parents expect school deadlines to be met and provide support and assistance to ensure that they are. York teachers are always vigilant about reminding students to complete homework on time. Long-term projects and assignments have built-in sub-deadlines: the pieces of a Science Fair write-up, the paragraphs of an essay, the first and second drafts of a research paper.

So what supplants the Rational Decision Maker in our minds? Urban calls it the Instant Gratification Monkey. Instinctive, wild, carefree, and playful, the Instant Gratification Monkey pounces gleefully on every shiny object. It elbows the Rational Decision Maker smack in the ribs and takes over the helm. “Why struggle through that Algebra homework?” it asks, winningly. “It would be so much more fun to look at some YouTube videos, read that adventure novel, binge watch the first season of Jane the Virgin, re-read Harry Potter for the twenty-fifth time, or even spend a few hours researching that cool sea creature that Ms. Kiest mentioned in class today.”

Enter The Panic Monster. The one creature that is powerful enough to silence the Instant Gratification Monkey and, as Urban says, send it running for the nearest banana tree, is the Panic Monster. That English paper is due tomorrow and I haven’t started it! I’m seven assignments behind on my Physics homework and Dr. Hanna is going to write an email home! The dance is tomorrow night and my parents said I couldn’t go if my Dictator Project wasn’t finished. When the Panic Monster takes control, we get to work. The problem is that the Panic Monster comes with a great deal of stress. We know that stress releases cortisol and other harmful chemicals in our brains. We go into a fight or flight mode, and that’s hard on us physically and emotionally. Once we get into college and life beyond, deadlines are much less frequent than they were in high school, parents aren’t nearby to monitor the work getting done (or not), and professors won’t intervene as York teachers do. These are a few reasons we encourage parents to gradually back off so that students have practice in managing their deadlines alone before going off to college.

What distinguishes serious procrastinators from us minor league procrastinators is that the Panic Monster emerges very late, as if it decided not to get active until it could see the whites of the deadline’s eyes. Urban divides procrastinators into three types. First is the Disastinator. Disastinators are in the worst position, and “procrastination is completely ruining their lives” because the Instant Gratification Monkey “has stopped being afraid of the Panic Monster and has become all-powerful.” The second category is the Impostinator, or the procrastinator wearing a productive person mask. Impostinators are fooled into believing that busy means productive. They spend time drawing up lists without ever checking off a task, creating study schedules that never get implemented, organizing the perfectly coordinated and labeled binder that never gets used, making up flash cards that are never reviewed. It feels as though important work is getting done, but Impostinators never reach their goals. The third category is the Successstinator. Urban suggests that procrastinators never fully conquer the Instant Gratification Monkey, nor should they. The cheeky little devil can be a creative fellow, after all. But when we find meaning in our activities, and we take on projects that are truly important to us, we can allow our Rational Decision Maker to wrest control from the Monkey.
So how just how do we wrest control? Urban believes, and I agree, that it’s a question of confidence. Procrastinators simply have no confidence that they can be successful in breaking the grip of the monkey. Like everything else, we have to take small steps that give us some traction. The traction leads to successes. The successes build our confidence.

Part I: Planning
Step one: Make a list of what you need or want to get done.
Step two: Prioritize. What one project is the most meaningful, important, or urgent?
Step three: Turn this one daunting project into a series of small, clear, manageable tasks. As Urban puts it, “no one ‘builds a house.’ They lay one brick again and again and again and the end result is a house.” What are the bricks of your project?
Step four: Clarify a murky item. A vague task on your list will bring you to a screeching halt. “Research my dictator” is too broad. “Ask Mrs. McDowell for a recommendation of one of our library databases to search for information on my dictator” is much more specific and achievable.

That takes us to...

Part II: Doing
Pick a specific time to begin. Set an alarm. When the alarm rings, put aside every distraction. Turn off all access to media. Close your email, turn off your texting, put your phone on airplane mode. Get started. This sounds easy, but it’s actually the hardest part. This is where your Instant Gratification Monkey will fight the hardest to get you off track. Every time you come upon a difficult piece of the equation, your Monkey is going to try to get you off track again. You have to keep working on your task. Be aware of it, acknowledge it with patience and kindness. Then get back to what you were doing. What you’ll find is that if you power through, you’ll suddenly start feeling good about the progress, about your strength, about your tenacity. Your confidence begins to climb. And then, suddenly, you’re almost done! The end is in sight. If you’re wise, you’ll have planned a reward for the moment of completion. You and the Monkey get to have fun together! And you’ve earned it.

The tough thing is that the Monkey has a short memory. Sure, you’ve succeeded once, but that doesn’t mean it’s going to remember that when you try again tomorrow. You’ll have to go through the whole process again. You might find some success by keeping a few things in mind: Everything you do is a choice.

Find the ways that work for you to control the Monkey. You might lean on others to help nag or remind you, set an alarm, feed your Panic Monster by raising the stakes, minimize distractions. Aim for slow, steady progress.

From here, I’m going to turn over the podcast to Urban’s own words:

At its deepest level, it comes down to a battle of confidence. The RDM and monkey each have their own idea of how to spend your time…, and whichever of them is more confident—whoever has a stronger belief that they’re the alpha dog in the relationship—ends up prevailing. The difference between a procrastinator and a non-procrastinator is simply that the procrastinator’s monkey and RDM both believe that the monkey is the alpha dog, and the non-procrastinator’s pair both believe that the RDM is the boss.
But as firmly entrenched as these confidence levels may feel, the monkey and the RDM share a single pool of confidence with a fixed sum—when one’s confidence goes up, the other’s goes down—and the balance can begin to be tipped by the smallest changes, taking your storyline with it.

Figuring out the starting point of this chicken and egg paradox is each procrastinator’s personal quest. But a universal starting point is to try to remain aware as much as possible. Aware of what’s important, aware of what’s urgent, and most importantly—aware of the monkey. The monkey is not your friend, and he never will be. But he’s also part of your head and impossible to get rid of, so get in the habit of noticing him. When you wake up in the morning, he’ll be there. When you sit down to work, he’ll be there. Whenever you most badly need all the guts and grit you can muster, he’ll be there to take your guts and grit away.

But he thrives off of unconsciousness. Simply by noticing him and saying to yourself, “Yup, there’s the monkey, right on cue,” you can start to tip the balance out of its default state. Then maybe one day, you’ll find yourself nonchalantly shoving the monkey off of the [helm] with the simplest, “No monkey, not now.” And your life will be forever changed.

What Urban is referring to, of course, is Mindfulness. If we can become Mindful, or fully aware, of our Instant Gratification Monkey, we can begin to take control of it. Maybe I liked this blog series so much because he’s speaking my language!

For much more insight into how to learn to take control of your procrastination, visit the Wait But Why site and click on the Procrastination series.

As always, I welcome your questions or comments. Just drop me an email at jsherry@york.org.