



# Understanding & beating procrastination

A workbook & guide

## An introduction



Procrastination affects us all. Even with all the planning, desire and good intentions, often we can fall victim to procrastination. It has the power to delay our progress; to rob us of our belief in ourselves and what we are doing; and to halt our achievements. Procrastination is powerful, but with a bit more understanding of what it is, some considerations of how procrastination impacts you subjectively and some key steps in how to overcome it, you don't have to be at its mercy.

In this workbook, we will take a closer look at what procrastination is all about, where it comes from and how to stop it. We will explore the meaning of procrastination, there will be tasks that help you explore what procrastination means for you as an individual, and tips to help overcome it.

## Setting the scene – Jamie’s story

The alarm went off abruptly again at 5am on Monday morning. Jamie, familiar with the sudden rush of anticipation when his phone jangled violently at such an early hour, didn't hesitate as he rose out of bed. He had things to do, a post graduate degree dissertation in sociology and his own growing and promising e-commerce business that helped fund his studies. He was busy. As was commonplace with his morning routine, he brushed his teeth, showered and had his energising morning breakfast. After that, he always referred to his to-do list. He studied the list he had compiled the night before intensely. The to-do list read, wake 5am...check, breakfast 5.30am...check, data analysis for sociology dissertation 5.45am..."right" he said aloud, "now down to business". He was so close to the end of a degree in which he had invested years of work, challenge, tears and cash. He could almost taste graduation. His dream was almost a reality. All he had to do was to finish his dissertation in time and the degree was his. Feeling motivated, he sat at his desk, opened his laptop, opened his dissertation file, took a deep breath and...stopped.

He stared at the document. He felt a rush of fear, anxiety, and even apathy. He looked out of the window next to his desk and watched the tree in his back garden sway in the morning breeze. He watched his elderly neighbour across the road make his way down to his living room. He checked his phone for the morning's news, for his missed Facebook notifications from during the night. He scrolled through some pictures on Instagram for a while and then put his phone down. He returned to his laptop but was overwhelmed by a sense of boredom and disengagement from what was a really important task that he had dedicated so much time to already. He shut his laptop, convinced himself that he had done plenty already and turned on his TV. The latest recorded season of his favourite show remained unwatched, "why not watch just a couple of episodes" he thought. Before he knew it, the whole morning had passed, then the afternoon and all of a sudden it was early evening. His intentions were good, he had a desire to undertake the really important work he had planned, yet something stopped him. What was it? He reflected on the day he had wasted, he had many days like this one. Why was this happening? What could he do to change this strange cycle he seemed to have invested in?



## What's your own story?

Have you ever experienced what Jamie is going through? Take some time to think about your own story and write it down below.

### **Thinking about your own situation**

With all the best intentions, planning and passion in the world, it can still feel like a metaphorical barrier is in your way to really getting on with the things you want to do.

Perhaps you have dedicated years of your life to a task or craft, and like Jamie seem to be at a point where the desire and intention is there, but the execution is lacking?

Or perhaps you have planned and thought about something you have wanted to do for years but never felt able to take that first step?

Perhaps you have put things off or often found something more engaging and interesting to absorb your attention.

Perhaps you have found the task you wanted to undertake too large, or maybe you've witnessed others achieve more, leaving you a bit paralysed.

Perhaps after years of putting "that thing" off, you have become frustrated with your lack of progress or even your ability to start.

## What is procrastination?

Procrastination is something that has been a part of human nature for thousands of years. In ancient Greece, philosophers like Aristotle and Socrates suffered from it. They said that procrastination was the act of doing something when you know you should be doing something else. For you, and for all of us, that might look like a number of things. For example:



- Scrolling Instagram when you know you should be working on a university assignment
- Playing a game on your phone when you have work to be getting on with
- Watching your favourite TV show when you know you need to be cooking dinner

Ultimately procrastination is the entity that stops you getting on with stuff you know you need to be, and should be, doing.

To give you a little more insight, the word procrastination comes from the Latin word “procrastinatus”, which is broken up into two parts. “Pro” means “forward” and “crastinus” meaning simply “of tomorrow”. Ultimately the word procrastination means forwarding something to the next day.

## Why do we procrastinate?

If you think back to Jamie’s story, he had everything going for him. He had the right intentions, he had planned, he clearly had passion and drive, he even had the right opportunity to undertake the tasks he had set himself. So why was he procrastinating? From the outside looking in, it might seem difficult to understand why someone would procrastinate in a situation like Jamie’s.

That is part of the difficulty with procrastination, it’s really hard to understand why we procrastinate. What’s more, the answer is subjective. Jamie will have his underlying reasons, and so will you.

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Write down three of your own reasons for procrastinating

## Common reasons for procrastination

### **Time inconsistency**

To bring a bit of science into the mix, behavioural psychology research has argued that “time inconsistency” has a big role to play in the development of procrastination.

Time inconsistency means that our brains are hard wired in a way that gratifies immediate reward over long-term gain more often than not. Think of it like this, whenever you set a goal or have a big task you want to complete, you set that goal as your future self. You look 3, 6, 12 months into the future and say, “I want to achieve that”. That’s your future self setting the goal. You might look at that big goal down the road and think “yeh, I can do that, I really want to achieve that”. That’s great, but setting that long-term goal doesn’t really do much for you in the immediate moment. It is the future self that sets the goal, but it is the present self that has to take action. When you get to the daily routine of working towards accomplishing your long-term goal, you are no longer working for the future self, instead you are working for the present self, and that present self wants immediate gratification more than it wants long-term payoff.

Look at it like this, maybe your future self has set a long-term goal that you want to lose 20lbs. That’s great! You have set out how long it might take you and what it will look like when you have achieved it. Again, great! However, you wake up on Monday morning and your present self has to get you to eat healthier and go for that hour-long workout after work. The present self is trying to do this while working towards those long-term goals, and it doesn’t like that as much as the immediate gratification it could get elsewhere. Immediate gratification such as stopping off at McDonalds on the way home from work or relaxing and watching TV instead of going for that gym session.

Basically, the present self and the future self don’t really get along with each other. The future self wants to lose all the weight, while the present self wants a fast food meal. Of course, it makes sense that you have to put down the donut and pick up a carrot if you don’t want to be overweight in 10 years’ time...but that’s ten years away. How is one donut going to have an impact?

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Do you have any long-term goals like achieving a qualification or losing weight? If so, make a note of them here.

### Decision paralysis

We live in a world where we are constantly distracted. In days gone by, things moved at a slower, more manageable pace, but these days we have smart phones, our favourite TV shows on demand, a comfy three seater sofa in our front room and the ability to access and buy anything we want online, all available to us at any time of the day. In other words, an unlimited opportunity to get distracted and ultimately procrastinate.

Decision paralysis basically means that with more and more stimuli for us to procrastinate over, it makes it harder and harder to focus on the thing that is most important for us to be doing in the moment.

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### Not understanding your motivation

Again, if we go back to Jamie's story, we can see that he has the ability, he has the opportunity and he has the will to continue to work hard for his goals and dreams. However, there is something we don't know about Jamie – what are his reasons for doing what he is doing? What is pushing him to finish his degree? What is driving him to continue to grow his online company?

From the outside looking in, we might see this as somewhat irrelevant. As we have said, he has everything he needs to be successful. What point would there be in understanding why Jamie is doing what he is doing?

Well, not really knowing why we are doing something can have a massive impact on our levels of procrastination. If we don't understand our motivation for undertaking a task, then we are much more likely to procrastinate when it's time to work towards completing it.

Let's consider an example. Take a look at the green box (right). Who do you think will have the greater motivation to complete their degree and why do you think this?

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What are your constant distractions? Write them down here.

### Who is likely to be the most motivated?

#### Person 1

Person 1 is a university student. Her parents have bought her a flat and a car and she knows that she could have a secure job in the family company after her degree.

#### Person 2

Person 2 is a single parent who is fully reliant on completing her degree in order to open up more opportunities in the world of work.

I can't do this!



Well, the single parent is likely to have a stronger sense of their own motivation than the person who has been given lots of opportunities already. Now, this isn't to say that people who have more opportunities don't have a purpose or can't overcome procrastination. The point here is that the single parent is likely to have a clear reason for studying (it will probably have been a hard slog to get onto the degree course and nobody does that without asking themselves why?), whereas the more privileged individual may not.

#### **Lack of self-worth and belief**

Self-worth and belief are massive contributing factors to our levels of procrastination. If we don't have a real belief in our ability to undertake a task, or if we feel that we are not worth the effort to achieve our goals, then we will be more susceptible to procrastination.

Again, perhaps an example might be helpful - see the green box (right).

Perhaps with this example you can start to see just how much our belief in our ability to undertake the task may determine our levels of procrastination.

Refer back to your own story. Is self-worth and belief a factor in your own procrastination?

### Why does self-worth and belief matter?

A man is preparing to give a speech. He gets more and more anxious about the prospect of standing up and speaking in front of hundreds of people. He becomes increasingly apprehensive as the countdown continues to the big day. The anxiety develops so much that he convinces himself that the effort just isn't worth it. He simply won't be able to do it.

This lack of self belief has led him to procrastinate. Every time he sits down to write the first line of his speech, he remembers the fear of public speaking and puts off the work until the night before.



## Key things to consider when understanding your own procrastination

The purpose of this workbook is to get you thinking, “maybe this is part of the cause of my procrastination”, “maybe it’s a combination of all of these things”. Some of the things we have discussed in ‘why we procrastinate’ will apply to you and other things won’t. So, how do you build a clearer idea of your own situation?

The first thing to do is to think about your levels of procrastination and when they happened.

Maybe you woke up early and sat in front of your computer for an hour not really doing much. What was the trigger that set procrastination into motion there? Maybe you were still really tired at that point and couldn’t face working just yet. Maybe your motivation and goal setting needs work (remember our points on time inconsistency and understanding your motivation).

So, in order to understand your own procrastination better, make sure you understand the triggers to the real life examples that you have experienced throughout the day.

Also, take some time to consider all of the points that we have explored on why we procrastinate. We looked at:

- Time inconsistency
- Decision paralysis
- Motivation
- Self-belief and worth

It may be that one or two of these are most appropriate to you or you may think that self-belief is the main factor in your challenges with procrastination. Figuring this out for yourself sets you on the right path to better understanding your procrastination, and ultimately overcoming it.

Make a note of your own situation on the next page.



Sit down at the end of a day when you have tried to get things done, but procrastinated. Make a note of what you were trying to get done and when. What was the trigger that stopped you getting on with it? Some examples of triggers include tiredness, lacking motivation, etc. Take a look at the previous page if you're stuck.

Task	Time of day	Trigger

## Ways to overcome procrastination

So, we have looked at why people procrastinate and we've looked at your own reasons for procrastinating. Let's now start to think a little bit about how we might overcome procrastination. What can you do to actually end procrastination in the future?

### 1. Forgive yourself

Forgiving yourself for your past procrastinations is our first tip. It's going to be challenging to overcome your procrastination in the future if you can't let go of all the times you procrastinated in the past. This isn't easy, particularly if you're prone to self-criticism. However it's easier if you understand your reasons for procrastinating in the first place.

Think about Jamie's story. As he tries to overcome his procrastination, he needs to reflect on mornings like the one we looked at and forgive himself. If he constantly looks back at such situations, he will likely punish himself further. What will that do to his self-worth? It's likely to reduce it further, which we know can have a detrimental effect on procrastination.

If you really want to make progress and stop procrastinating then the first step is to forgive yourself for all the times you procrastinated in the past.

### 2. Plan, plan, and plan again

Nobody intends to procrastinate. You may plan to wake up early, sit at your desk and get your work done. If only it was that easy.

One of the ways in which procrastination can happen is due to lack of proper planning. As in Jamie's story, the intention to no longer procrastinate was there and the desire to make the next day more productive was evident. However, there was little planning. What are you going to work on? When are you going to do it? How long will you spend on each thing? What would your end goal be and how would you know that you had done a good productive day of work?

Without a detailed plan containing all this information, you are much more likely to procrastinate. Jobs may pile up throughout the day and you may lose focus on what was most important.

Planning and organisation are the key.



Before each day (perhaps the night before):

- Write down what you need to get done?
- Think about and rank the tasks in order of importance.
- Plan when you will do these things?
- Plan how long you will spend on them?
- Ask yourself how you will know when you are done/what are your goals for these tasks?

Planning is more than just arranging your time; it's about considering exactly what you are going to do with that time. Invest some time to plan and structure your day and you are much less likely to procrastinate and more likely to get things done.

## Make a plan for tomorrow

Order	Task	Key goals	Time of day/ how much time to spend

### 3. Break your goals down

Perhaps by now you have had more of a chance to think about Jamie's story. Initially, it seemed like Jamie had everything worked out. He had ambition, motivation and a desire to be productive with his day.

However, a second look gives us a few hints as to the reasons why he might have ended up procrastinating.

First of all, he didn't have much of a plan for his day (see point number 2 above). All he knew was that he wanted to be "productive". That is such a wide-ranging statement. Productive with what? How was he going to be productive?

Secondly, his goals seemed non-existent. He had a degree to finish...and that's all we know. We don't know what exactly he was planning to work on that day...and it doesn't seem like he knew either.

It seems like his only goal was to finish his degree. I think we can all argue that this is a massive goal. Too big to complete in one day, probably too big to feel like he even made any progress in one day. No wonder he procrastinated.

Jamie would have really benefited from breaking his huge goal down into manageable chunks. This is a really effective way of reducing levels of procrastination. It provides us with a set of smaller, more manageable goals to contribute to our overall large goal. Like a set of stepping stones!

Let's try and do this for Jamie now:

<b>Main goal</b>	Finish degree
<b>Secondary goal (to be completed by the end of the month)</b>	Complete first draft of dissertation for supervisor
<b>Mini goals (to be completed by the end of the day)</b>	Finish introduction section of dissertation Review data Read over results section and make changes where necessary

We can start to see that when breaking these goals down a little, there is more opportunity for focus. If Jamie had done this, he may have been more productive, had more of a focus and identity to his day, and ultimately have procrastinated less. He would also gain a sense of achievement at the end



of each day, which would make him feel happier and more capable, and therefore less likely to procrastinate.

Maybe you have a big goal that you really want to complete. The enormity of that goal can sometimes be overwhelming. As the old saying goes, “how do you eat an elephant? One forkful at a time”. Break that big goal down into monthly objectives and then weekly objectives and then daily goals that contribute to the progression of your bigger goal.

Having a huge and overwhelming goal is a common cause of procrastination. Always take time to plan your steps along the way and reward yourself when you reach key targets.

“how do you eat  
an elephant?  
One forkful at a  
time”

What are your own long-term goals? Choose one or two and write them down. Then write a secondary goal and mini goals for each.

<b>Main goal</b>	
<b>Secondary goal</b>	
<b>Mini goals</b>	
<b>Main goal</b>	
<b>Secondary goal</b>	
<b>Mini goals</b>	

#### **4. Eat the frog first**

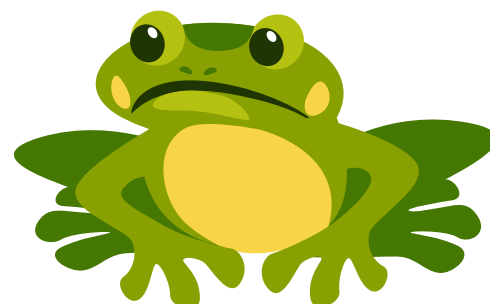
Bear with us on this one...we're not actually recommending eating frogs as a means of improving your procrastination. What we mean is that you should get your biggest goal, or most challenging objective done first thing in the day.

Eat the frog first basically means get the part of your day that you are dreading the most out of the way.

It's part of human nature to put things off that we don't want to do. We might not want to exercise today, even though we know we should, and so we put it off...we procrastinate. However, all that does is make the prospect of exercise all the more anxiety provoking and negative. The idea of working out later in the day becomes less and less attractive, especially after a full day of work for example.

That's why eating the frog first is a really effective way to avoid procrastination. When you wake up, you've planned your day effectively, you've got a desire to overcome your procrastination, you will be much more productive first thing.

Whether its exercising, cooking healthy meals for the day, getting on with your university assignment or completing that big report for work, you will feel so much better finishing it up before you move on to anything else.



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**Be aware of your frogs!**  
What are your own personal 'frogs'? Write them down here.

#### **5. Now eat the rest**

OK so tackling the main task of the day first makes sense and it's a great way to manage any procrastination that might get in the way.

But what about the rest of the things you need to be getting on with?

Well, those are important too. You might be concerned that once you tackle the main thing at the start of the day, that after that you might start procrastinating on the other tasks on your list.

A really effective way to get on with the rest of the things you need to do and to avoid procrastination as you complete them is to make an “importance list”

Creating a list of jobs based on their importance is a really helpful step in overcoming procrastination and maintaining productivity.

An example of an importance list

1	Finish report for boss due tomorrow (the frog, the main thing that needs to be completed that day).
2	Proof read introduction for assignment due for university next week.
3	Draft up some ideas of topics I want to discuss for work presentation at the end of the month.
4	Write blog post for my website.

Creating a list like this is a great way of maintaining your productivity and reducing your procrastination. Simply work on the next task based on how important it is.

1	
2	
3	
4	

### **What would your own importance list look like?**

Note down four key tasks for the next month in order of importance.



## **6. Give yourself ownership over what you do**

Working out is hard. It can be a real slog. It's difficult walking into a gym for the first time or heading out for that first jog after months of putting it off. Exercising is one of those things that we as people are notorious for procrastinating over. We put it off time and time again, even though we know we have to do it.

Exercise is also one of those things that we are constantly reminded we NEED to be doing. We see TV adverts about obesity. We watch documentaries about the importance of healthy eating. We read newspaper articles about the impact that poor physical health is having on our economy. We may even be told by our doctor that we HAVE to exercise more and that we MUST eat a healthier diet.

In many ways it may feel that we often don't have a choice. Eventually we might hear the message so often that we start working out more. We are so used to being told we HAVE to work out that we just go and do it. However, after some time has passed, the likelihood is that we will end up procrastinating to the point where we have stopped all together. Why is that?

In part it's because it was never our decision to work out in the first place. We were told by our doctor, the government, the TV, the newspaper, our partners, family or friends that we MUST start exercising more. It's like we never had ownership of going for that run or eating a healthier diet.

The way we phrase things and the way we think about things has a massive impact on our procrastination levels. If you feel that going for a run is not something you would choose to do, then you are much less likely to stick at it.

Instead of buying into the mindset that "I have to exercise because my doctor told me I MUST", why not turn that into "I CHOOSE to exercise more because I know it will be better for my health".

Instead of thinking "I NEED to eat a healthier diet because my wife told me I HAVE to lose weight", why not try "I have DECIDED to eat a healthier diet because I WANT to lose weight".

The way we term things and the ownership we feel we have over our decisions has a massive impact on our procrastination levels.

A recent study from Edinburgh University found that people who made the decision to run five miles a week were on average 60% more likely to stick with it after two months than people who were told and instructed that they must run five miles a week.

**“A recent study from Edinburgh University found that people who made the decision to run five miles a week were on average 60% more likely to stick with it after two months than people who were told and instructed that they must run five miles a week.”**

By taking ownership of your decisions and actions through the way you term and think about your decisions, you automatically hold yourself more accountable. Your accountability is no longer with your wife, the government, or your GP...it's with you.

Have a think about the things you regularly procrastinate over. Do you feel you have ownership of them? Do you feel you have chosen to undertake them?

If not, then think about how you might start to obtain more ownership. Watch how that has an impact on your procrastination.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Write down two tasks that you feel you lack ownership over. You will probably use words like 'I NEED' 'I HAVE' 'I MUST'

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Now rewrite them and take ownership of them. You will probably use words like 'I WANT' 'I CHOOSE' 'I HAVE DECIDED'

## **7 Manage the little things that get in the way better**

Little things can really hinder progress towards your goals or objectives.

For example, you might be working on a big report due the next day for your boss. While you are in the flow and working productively, you are constantly hit with emails from colleagues. You remember that you had to email a client and that you had to discuss an IT problem you have been having with the head of IT in your department.

These kinds of issues pop up for us all throughout the day. They often have the power to overwhelm us and as a result we may start to procrastinate.

There is a really helpful formula that can help you maintain productivity, manage the little things that get in the way, and reduce the likelihood of you procrastinating.

If you are in the middle of working on your main task for the day and you remember something you need to do, you can do either of two things:

1. If it won't take longer than three minutes then just do it now, tackle it as soon as it arises, get it out of the way and get on with the main task you were originally working on.
2. If it takes longer than three minutes then reserve it for the end of the day (maybe set aside half an hour to tackle all those small jobs. Make a note of it and remind yourself to do it at the end of the day and get back to the task at hand.

If you remember a bunch of things you have to do that day all at once, or within the space of an hour then write those things down and store them to come back to during the half hour you have set aside at the end of the day.

Working in this way can really help keep you focused and prevent procrastination.



## Summary of key points

There are many reasons why we procrastinate. Here are some:

- Time inconsistency
- Decision paralysis
- Lack of motivation
- Lack of self-belief and worth

If you haven't already done so, take some time to review the reasons for procrastination and think about why you personally procrastinate. Consider all the reasons we have discussed above. Which ones make the most sense to you? Remember, understanding why we procrastinate is the key to overcoming it.

### Key steps in overcoming procrastination

#### **1 Forgive yourself**

The first and most important step is for you to forgive yourself for all the times you procrastinated in the past. Try not to get caught up in the negativity of fixating on all the times you shouldn't have procrastinated. Forgive yourself and move on.

#### **2 Plan, plan, and plan again**

Organising your time, how you get your tasks done, how you will know they are done and when you are going to do them is a vital step in keeping procrastination at bay. Set enough time aside to really get to grips with what you want to do and when.

#### **3 Break those goals down**

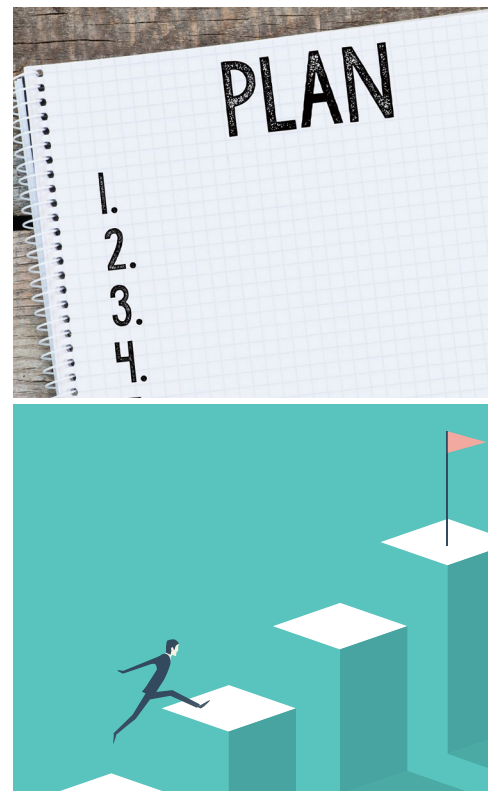
Having massive goals is challenging at times. Break the goal down into manageable chunks. Set some weekly and daily goals that are achievable and help you push towards your main goal. That way you will be more determined and less likely to be victim to procrastination.

#### **4 Eat the frog first**

Do the biggest task on your agenda first thing in the day when you are most prepared and ready. That way once you are done, you can feel a little bit better about the fact that you have your main task out of the way.

#### **5 Now eat the rest**

Don't forget about the rest of your tasks. Sometimes when we feel we have too much on, we procrastinate. Arrange the rest of your daily tasks in order of importance and make your way down it...



### **6 Give yourself ownership over what you do**

Be aware of how you feel about the tasks you are undertaking. Do you feel pressured into them, or that you don't have ownership over them? Change the way you 'frame' your goals and the way you think about them to give you more ownership.

### **7 Manage the little things that get in the way better**

It's normal that small things will regularly get in the way, distract us, and fuel procrastination away from the main objectives we need to be getting on with. Think about how to deal with these small things to ensure you keep procrastination at bay.



## Final thoughts

Procrastination is a daily challenge for us all, but there is plenty you can do to better understand and manage it. Take some time to work through this workbook and revisit it when you feel you are starting to procrastinate again. Have a think about your reasons for procrastinating and take action to overcome it using the tips we have discussed in this guide.

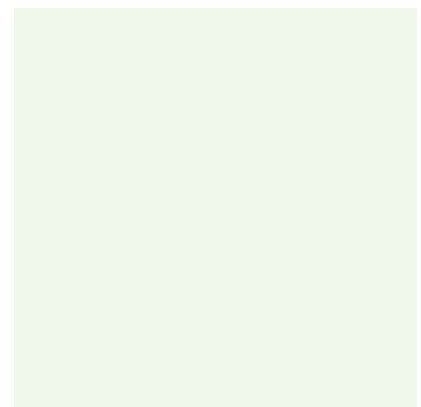
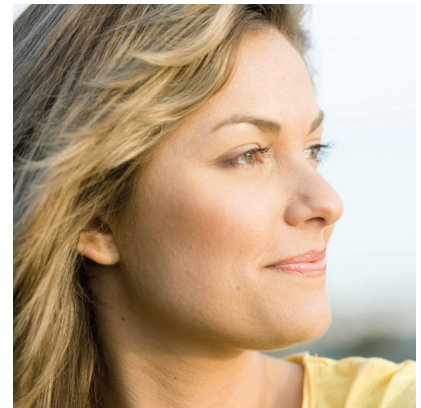
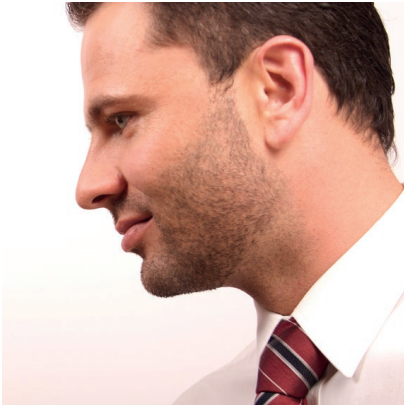


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