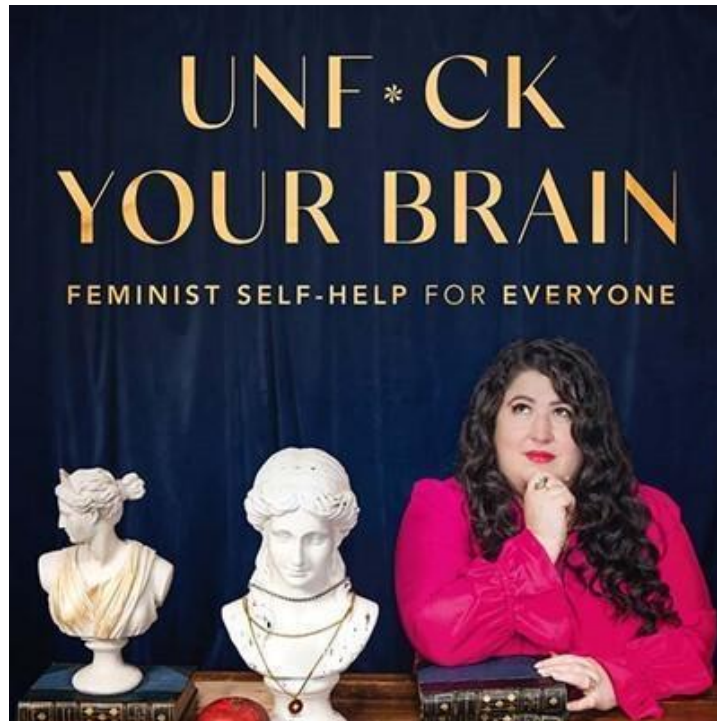


UFYB 490: How to Stop Procrastinating - A Better Solution



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Hello, my friends. Today, we're going to talk about procrastination, and I want to start with a sentence that is going to flip everything you think you know about procrastination on its head. Procrastination is not a problem. Procrastination is actually your solution. Procrastination is your brain's solution to a problem. It's doing exactly what it was designed to do. The reason you can't stop procrastinating no matter how many planners you buy or productivity hacks you read at 11pm the night before something is due is that you're trying to fix something that from your brain's perspective is not actually broken. In fact, it's operating very effectively.

So today we're going to talk about what procrastination is solving for, why feeling bad about it doesn't motivate you and actually makes the whole thing worse, and how to actually change this behavior instead. I'm also going to do a special section at the end if you have ADHD or suspect that you might, because while the picture there is a little bit different, there's still a lot of ways to use thought work to help you with procrastination, even if you have a neurodivergent brain. So let's get into it.

Welcome to UnF*ck Your Brain. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

All right, so let's start with talking about the problem procrastination is trying to solve. When most of us think about procrastination, we treat it like a character flaw. We think that we are lazy, we're undisciplined, that something is fundamentally wrong with our willpower. And we try to productivity hack ourselves out of it. We buy a new planner that's got little gold foil corners. We download the 47th productivity app of our lives. We make a color-coded calendar that looks like a Mondrian painting. And then we still don't do the thing that we needed to do. And so we add that not doing it to the giant pile of evidence our brain has already collected that we

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are broken, that we don't follow through, that we are a procrastinator, like it's an identity, like it's genetic, like it's just something about us that we can't change.

But procrastination from the perspective of your brain is not a problem, it's a solution. It is a solution to emotions your brain doesn't want to have. I'm gonna say that again because it's so important. Procrastination, from your brain's perspective, is a solution to the problems of emotions your brain doesn't want you to have. Procrastination is an emotional avoidance technique. That is what it is. You think you're avoiding the task, you're actually avoiding the feeling that you anticipate having if you do the task, either right before you start, while you do it, or afterwards.

Your brain has run a subconscious calculation and it has decided that whatever feeling it fears is on the other side of getting started on that task or finishing it is worse than the feeling of putting it off. So your brain picks the lesser of two evils. It gives you the relief of avoidance and you go back to scrolling Instagram not even knowing that that whole thing was happening under the hood. Procrastination is a coping mechanism. It helps you avoid a feeling you don't want to feel. So I wanna walk you through some examples and some feelings that we're usually running from because it's gonna help you identify which types of feelings you tend to be avoiding and what is driving your procrastination.

So the first one, and you can almost think of this as like an umbrella category, is just anxiety. You have a project at work and you think about starting it and your stomach drops because what if it fails? Or almost worse sometimes subconsciously, what if it succeeds? And now you have a bigger reputation to live up to, you have more responsibility, you have more chances to fail in the future. Or your brain thinks, what if when I sit down, I discover I don't know what I'm doing? So we might feel afraid that we can't complete the task or we don't know how, we don't have enough time or

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someone is gonna be upset with the way we do it. So fear of some kind is really the overarching driver of most procrastination.

Another particular flavor of it can be the insecurity flavor where you think I don't know how to do this or I can't do this well. And procrastinating lets you postpone the moment when you would have to confront that. So you don't finish the application, you don't draft the proposal, you don't call the client because the second you start, the gap between what you wish you could do or what you think you're supposed to do and what you then think you can actually do is going to feel really uncomfortable.

And this is particularly true if you are a perfectionist, which so many women are socialized to be. We think that we need to perform perfectly. We need to do everything perfectly. We need to appear perfect. We certainly shouldn't be seen to be struggling or to do something wrong or make a mistake. And that perfectionism is so paralyzing and it produces procrastination because we are afraid that we won't be able to do something perfectly.

We also can procrastinate sometimes when the feeling that we're afraid of having is shame. But we might feel it as fear, but what we're afraid of is future shame. So like you don't book your dentist appointment because you already know what they're gonna say about your flossing. You don't open your credit card statement because you already know you're gonna feel terrible when you see that number. You don't reply to the friend whose text has been sitting there for three weeks because any reply now has to acknowledge that you ignored it for three weeks. So it's not the task itself, it's the feeling you anticipate of being judged by someone else or yourself, and that's what you're trying to avoid.

Sometimes you're trying to avoid boredom. This can be especially true if you have ADHD, which we're gonna talk about at the end specifically. That can happen in neurotypical people too. If you tell yourself that the task is

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gonna be tedious and miserable, then of course your brain is not gonna wanna do it.

I also find that imposter syndrome drives procrastination really hard, especially in high-achieving women, because our thought subconsciously is like, If I sit down and try to do this thing, it's gonna become obvious to me and maybe to everyone else that I'm not as capable as people think I am, that I don't know what I'm doing, that I shouldn't be here, that I don't deserve to be where I want or where I am, or I can't achieve the next thing I want to achieve. So we don't sit down. We don't try and we stay safe on the bank of that river. We don't cross that gap between perception and reality.

Because in our heads, as long as we haven't really tried, then we haven't really failed. And your brain is just trying to avoid the pain of that moment, even if you know rationally that long term, you're going to have to do this thing. Or even if you believe rationally that it's worth it. The part of your brain that is more primitive, that just wants to avoid pain, is going to avoid.

And then the last feeling that I think drives a lot of procrastination is overwhelm. So you have something to do and the size of it makes your brain wanna lie down on the floor and just like tap out. And success feels so far away, or completing it feels so far away, that taking the first step feels like nothing and like it won't be worth it and it's not gonna get you anywhere, so you just don't do anything at all. The really fun slash fucked up part of procrastination is that we make it so much worse because almost invariably, on top of the original feeling we were trying to avoid, we add a nice layer of shame about procrastinating.

So now you have the feeling you were originally trying to avoid, plus you have a brand new feeling about yourself for avoiding it and you're judging yourself for procrastinating. So then you feel worse. Now you avoid more. Now, if you were to sit down at the task, not only do you have the feeling you're originally avoiding, but now you have shame of confronting your

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avoidance. Now you have your brain telling you that you waited so long, now it's gonna be even harder, now you have less time, right? So you're just like adding layers and layers of negative emotion. And now procrastination is protecting you from the original feeling and from the shame of having procrastinated this long. So you get two layers of avoidance for the price of one.

So you can see this is a vicious cycle, right? And without any intervention, there's basically two outcomes for most procrastinated tasks. The first outcome is that you do finally do the thing, generally because your fear of the deadline becomes more painful than the feeling that you were avoiding. So this is like when people say they work best under pressure, this is usually what it means. It means that they procrastinate, and then once they get close enough to a deadline, the panic about the deadline is stronger than the desire to avoid the emotion. They get flooded with cortisol and adrenaline and that pushes them through. Again, especially common if you have ADHD.

So you write the report at 2 a.m. the night before. You finally book that dental appointment because now your tooth starts hurting and you're worried about losing your tooth, which feels worse than getting shamed for not flossing. You apply for the job the day before applications close. Like the thing gets done, but you arrive at the finish line exhausted, convinced you barely pulled it off. You probably haven't done your last work because you're doing it at the last minute in a panic. And all of this just confirms every story your brain has been telling you about how unreliable and last minute you are.

And then often you're almost physically burnt out, especially if you experience a lot of stress hormones. So for instance, if you have ADHD and urgency is something your brain needs to get going, so you're always waiting until the last minute and you need that adrenaline and cortisol to get you going, well, that has an impact on your body. That urgency override

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floods you with the stress hormones so you do get it done, but there's a cost.

The second outcome for things that don't have deadlines is actually a piece that most people don't even think about or talk about with procrastination, but I think it's more important because it's invisible, but it can be bigger. Because sometimes the thing you're procrastinating just never gets done. You procrastinate it forever. And here's the dirty secret about most of the things that would actually transform your life. They don't have a deadline. Nobody's making you write the book. Nobody's making you start the business. Nobody's gonna give you a deadline for having the hard conversation with your spouse or to fire that client that you've been working with for years but is sucking the life out of you, right? Or your thoughts about them are sucking the life out of you, really, but you know what I mean.

No one's gonna force you to sign up for therapy or apply to grad school or end this relationship that you've been checked out of for two years. So that procrastination of the uncomfortable feeling can have huge costs for your life, way above and beyond like the stress of procrastinating things to the last minute and then rushing to get them done. Because some of the biggest things in your life, there will never be a rush to get them done. There's no external deadline, nobody can make you do it. And so procrastinating it just means you procrastinate forever, literally just until you die. And so you go your whole life carrying around an idea of who you could have been, but you never find out because there's no deadline. So obviously this is not how we want to live our lives.

So we're going to take a quick break, but stick with me when we come back, I'm going to walk you through the three steps you need to actually get out of procrastination. And I'm going to address neurodiversity, specifically ADHD, in terms of how it impacts you all.

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We'll be right back. Welcome back, my friends. So let's talk about how to actually solve this problem. Now we know procrastination is trying to protect you from a feeling. And so if you want to stop procrastinating, you can't solve it with a better calendar or just buckling down. You have to solve it at the level of the feeling. So here are the three steps to doing that.

Step one is to release the shame and stop identifying with the procrastination. And I know just telling someone to stop being ashamed is like telling them to stop being five foot four, or if you're me, five foot two. But what I mean is that the story you've been telling yourself about why you procrastinate is that generally it's some combination of like, I'm lazy, I'm broken, I'm irresponsible, I can't get my shit together, I'm not a real adult, I can't handle adulting, right, I'm irresponsible, I don't have enough willpower, I don't have enough discipline, there's something wrong with my brain, right? Those are all just stories that are wrong.

Procrastination is a really common and really effective emotional avoidance strategy that a lot of humans use. And it makes a lot of sense from the short-term perspective of your primitive brain. That part of your brain just wants to avoid pain in the short-term. It does not give a shit about the long-term. Your prefrontal cortex, that's the part of your brain that can think about the long-term. The part of your brain that just wants to avoid pain does not have that kind of long-term strategic thinking. So this strategy is effective to the primitive brain, which means there's nothing uniquely defective about you. You're a person with a brain doing brain things.

But this really matters because as long as you believe procrastination means something terrible about you, then you can't look at it directly and you don't get curious about what emotion you're trying to avoid. It's just too shameful, which makes it too painful. And that means it never gets solved. So step one is to take the moral weight off. You've just been trying to avoid a feeling and feeling that feeling might suck, but it's totally doable and

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there's nothing wrong with you. So we have to release that shame and then we can start to get curious.

So step two is to identify the emotion you're avoiding and the thought underneath it. So pick a thing you've been procrastinating on. I'll wait, I've got mine. I've been procrastinating something myself. I need this episode. Hold it in your mind and ask yourself, what is the feeling that I anticipate having if I do this task? I'm not asking you yet what you think about the task. I'm asking you, what do you feel when you imagine doing it? Now, for some of you, the feeling you are worried about is actually like sitting down to do the task. Some of you, the feeling is like even thinking about the task, even just starting to think about it makes me have this feeling. Some of you, it's not the task itself, it's what you anticipate will happen after the task.

So for instance, you might feel totally capable of writing an e-mail, but you have a lot of anxiety about what the consequences of that e-mail will be. So you just want to ask yourself, like when I think about this task, whatever it is, what feeling comes up? Sometimes the answer comes right away. Sometimes you may have to ask yourself a few questions, like am I anxious, am I afraid? Do I feel bad about myself? That's shame. Am I overwhelmed? You may have to do a little body scan to find it in your body. Like, okay, when I think about this, I know there's something I imagine I'm gonna feel if I start doing it. What does that feel like in my body?

Once you've identified the feeling, then you can ask yourself what thought is creating this feeling. So if the feeling's anxiety, your thought could be, what if I do this wrong? Or what if everyone finds out that I don't know what I'm doing? If it's shame, it could be, you know, I'm gonna try to do this, it's gonna fail, and that's gonna confirm that I'm not good enough. Or it could be anything, right? I'm just giving you some examples. Every brain is a special snowflake. But the point is to question what thought is creating that feeling. Once you can see the thought, now you have something to work

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with. Because that thought is not a fact, it's a sentence your brain is offering you, right? It's not a truth from the universe.

So step three is to use the thought ladder. I have a whole thought ladder episode. We will link it in the show notes. And that is the tool you can use to start practicing a new thought. And remember that the key to the thought ladder is baby step, often neutral thoughts. We don't go from, I have no idea where to start with this project and I'm gonna do it all wrong, and we don't try to jump straight to, I'm wildly capable and I'm gonna hit this out of the park. That's not gonna work probably, it's too far, right? Your brain is gonna reject it. What you need is a believable ladder step, something one step less shitty, less painful, a little more useful than where you are now.

So if the original thought is like, I don't even know where to start, there's too much of this to do, it's overwhelming, a latter step thought might be like, I don't have to know how to do the whole thing, I just have to take one step. I just have to decide what to do for the first 10 minutes. If you're avoiding something because you are afraid you're gonna feel bad about yourself based on the outcome, you might not be ready to believe it's gonna be amazing, but maybe you can practice thinking, I promise not to be mean to myself if this doesn't work out. So again, you can listen to that thought ladder episode. If you've done this work with me, you know how to brainstorm baby step thoughts. If not, listen to the thought ladder.

But what we need when we're procrastinating, just like anything else we wanna change, is we need a baby step thought that we can start working with. So you're gonna wanna practice that new thought on purpose. Write down a sticky note, you can put it in your phone, you can set it to music and sing yourself a little song, but you wanna practice that thought. Ideally, you're practicing it ahead of time, not just when it's time to work on the task, but especially when it's time to work on the task, that's the time to pull up that thought and think it and notice that your body feels a little better and then take that first little step. Open the document, make the call, edit the

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first paragraph, just take that one little step that will get you going and you will start to build the identity of being someone who does follow through and get things done.

So before we close here, I wanna talk specifically about ADHD because if you have ADHD, you are working with a different neurochemistry than a neurotypical person and pretending otherwise is gonna make this whole conversation not as useful and applicable for you. So the ADHD brain is wired to respond to novelty, interest, urgency, and challenge. So researchers sometimes call these interest-based motivators and dopamine regulation differences in ADHD brains can make it genuinely harder to engage with tasks that lack those qualities.

For the science nerds among us, William Dodson has written about this extensively and there's a big body of research on dopamine and motivation and ADHD that backs this up. On top of that, you likely have some level of executive function difference or challenge, which makes it harder to break down big tasks and sequence the steps and start. So here's what I want to be really clear about. Sometimes you are actually procrastinating for the exact same reasons that neurotypical person procrastinates, which is that you have a thought and a feeling about the task you're trying to avoid.

It's really important not to just assume that if you have a different neurotype, that's always the problem because you're also just a human with thoughts and feelings and insecurity or imposter syndrome or anxiety or overwhelm, right? And so you need to check in with yourself. you should go through this process and see like, am I avoiding actually because of a thought I can identify and a feeling associated with it? In that case, what I just taught is still what you can use. But sometimes you may be putting things off specifically because of the aspects of your neurotype that are different. Maybe the task feels overwhelming and you don't have a clear way to break it into smaller pieces because of your executive function challenges.

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Maybe you're procrastinating because the task is boring or uninteresting to your brain, and your brain is literally having trouble generating the dopamine to engage with it. That is not a moral failure, that's a wiring difference, and you can't change your neurotype, but you can learn to work with it. That might look like being willing to delegate the tasks your brain just refuses to engage with instead of telling yourself that you should be able to do them and still not doing them. Maybe it looks like body doubling, which is a fancy term for getting another human being to be physically or virtually present while you do the thing because that is a technique that some people with ADHD find really helpful.

Sometimes it might look like creating a deadline for yourself with a low stakes consequence, like telling your friend that if you don't send her the document by Friday, you owe her dinner so that your brain gets that urgency hit or some competitiveness is unlocked. It might look like trying to reframe the task as interesting by attaching it to something you actually care about. It might look like being careful with some of the physical inputs that help with focus, like working with your circadian rhythm instead of fighting it. People with ADHD often have a delayed circadian rhythm, so the time of day that your brain wants to focus on anything may be different than what neurotypical people expect.

Could look like moving your body before you sit down to focus, eating protein in the morning. There's a world of really good ADHD productivity content out there from creators who specialize in this, and your job is to experiment and find what works for your brain. But the most important thing, whether you're a neurodivergent or neurotypical, is to release the shame about procrastinating and learn to work with the brain you actually have. Not the one you wish you had, not the one your boss has or thinks you should have, not the one Instagram tells you that a productive woman has. Beating yourself up about procrastinating has never stopped anyone from procrastinating. And shaming yourself for how your brain works keeps

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you from figuring out how to engage with it better. And that is true for everyone with every type of brain.

So the next time anyone listening catches yourself procrastinating, before you rearrange your schedule, before you yell at yourself, before you read another article about a productivity hack, I want you to just stop and just ask yourself this simple question. What am I trying not to feel right now? That's it. Just be willing to be curious. What is the feeling I am avoiding? Once you know that, you can do something about it. You can remind yourself that you are a human with a human brain, and that procrastination makes sense to the part of your brain doing it, so you can release the shame. You can find the thought that is creating that emotion. You can use the thought ladder to come up with a neutral, a baby step, a ladder step thought that you can believe now to help you move towards being more willing to do the thing.

Procrastination has been working for you all this time. It had some unfortunate consequences probably, but it's been protecting you from feelings that your brain didn't think you could handle. But today can be the day that you stop believing you need that protection so much, because you're willing to feel what's there and you know how to help shift that feeling and move forward on what you need to do. So give it a try this week and I'll see you next time.