

Loosening the Grip of Procrastination and Writer's Block

BY ROBIN OAKS

This morning I took out a comma, and this afternoon I put it in again. - Oscar Wilde

I suspect that any legal professional reading this article, be they lawyer, judge, law student or paralegal, has at one time or another wanted to write something but felt blocked. As I submit this article for publication, I do not miss the irony that for the past several months when I thought about writing an article on procrastination, I found all sorts of excuses not to start. In this article, I will explore some of the underlying causes of writer's block, and outline six techniques¹ that may help. Factors contributing to procrastination vary. However, writer's block and procrastinating behaviors seldom have anything to do with laziness, time management, or writing abilities.

David Rasch, a local clinical psychologist (also an ombuds at UCSB) who coaches professionals experiencing writer's block, authored an essay with his daughter, Meehan Rasch, a lawyer, exploring procrastination – its causes and cures. In "Overcoming Writer's Block and Procrastination for Attorneys, Law Students and Law Professors"² he explains, "Writer's block is not a single identifiable syndrome." "Each person's writing process has its own context, history and specific pattern of behavior, thoughts and feelings." "The ability to write is intimately connected to your psychological state."

Procrastination involves the voluntary delay of an intended action that one wants to or needs to accomplish. At the same time, one knows the delay may derail achievement of the goal. It creates a conflict. The failure to act is often serving a secondary purpose or reward for the individual: avoiding feelings about an event in the future perceived to be unpleasant, unhappy, threatening or energy draining. At its heart procrastination is a stressful and emotional phenomenon.

Richard S. Lazarus,³ a psychologist who studied the interconnection of emotions and stress, defined stress as "a relationship" between a person's "perception of demands and the power to deal with them." How we are interpreting

our relative position in the win-lose story we are telling ourselves informs our bodies. Stress spurs us to action, or can cause us to freeze or to flee – hallmarks of procrastination's hold.

Timothy Pynchyl, a psychology professor, a member of the Procrastination Research Group⁴ and author of *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle: A Concise Guide to Strategies for Change*,

states, "Procrastination is an emotion regulation problem, not a time management problem...a maladaptive coping problem" that works to avoid a threatening feeling experienced in the present linked to a perception about an event in the future. One useful strategy suggested by Pynchyl is to re-direct focus away from an intended future writing goal and its completion and instead to think only about the next step needed to accomplish it. Ask yourself, "What specific step – framed as concretely as possible – do I need to do next?" Pynchyl explains, "When a task is conceptualized concretely and as a next small step, the threshold for engagement is low. It's easier to move forward. Of course, any movement forward on a goal through this action fuels well-being. Motivation follows."

Often our patterns of thinking solidify into limiting beliefs about who we are and how we cope with a challenge. Becoming aware of what we are thinking and feeling strengthens our ability to intentionally direct our attention. With awareness we have choice. Daniel Siegel, a noted neuropsychiatrist, explains the wonder of the brain's neuroplasticity with the phrase: "Where attention goes, neural firing flows, and neural connection grows."⁵ The brain is in fact changing and re-wiring all the time depending on the sensory information and interpretations of reality we are experiencing. This is why becoming aware of what we are experiencing is so important.

Judgmental self-talk and habits of thinking, often unconscious, are created by prior experiences and environments. Limiting beliefs might sound like: "I'm afraid I won't be able to finish in time." "Everything is riding on what I write." "Failure is not an option." "I feel overwhelmed and never supported." "They'll find out I really am not a good writer." "I really don't want to and no one can make me do this." "No one can find out I'm



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struggling because that means I'm weak." These limiting beliefs need to be made conscious and reframed⁶ in a less absolute, more encouraging manner.

In coaching sessions, I have shared with others useful methods for shifting energy-depleting thoughts to more energy-renewing experiences. Byron Katie's "the Work" and other methods can be used to "end suffering by questioning the stressful thoughts you create." Exploring "what would you be without your story", letting go by reframing stressful thoughts and building capacity to release uncomfortable emotions creates freedom to take constructive action. Lawyers, skilled in analysis, can use their logical reasoning aptitudes to deeply question, with self-compassion and courage, how their stress-inducing thinking patterns and resulting feelings may be holding them captive in procrastination's grip.

Certain mindfulness techniques that hone awareness skills are also effective for calming sympathetic arousal and strengthening the ability to focus.⁸ Sara Lazar,⁹ a neuroscientist at Harvard Medical School, studies long-term meditators and the effects on the brain of other mindbody strategies. Her research confirms that changes in the brain occur with these practices that diminish mind-wandering and optimize executive functioning. At the end of this article I provide an example of an attention and mindfulness practice that may prove useful for hacking procrastinating behavior.

Focus always involves effort. According to research, fifty to eighty percent of the time our brain is set to its default mode, which is mind-wandering. Mindfulness and cognitive restructuring act to rebalance our brains from the effects of distracting behaviors (technology, busy schedules, etc.) that weaken our attention skills and create more mind-wandering. Evidence-based mindfulness techniques can, with practice, strengthen our focusing powers leading to more thoughtful decision-making and reasoned choices. Lazar explains, "So when your inner voice is like 'Oh, no, I've got a deadline!' you can say, 'Ok, quiet, I'm trying to concentrate' "

Mindset is a concept that comes from the work of Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, who spent several decades researching achievement and success. Simply put, a mindset is a set of beliefs people have about themselves and their lives. "Fixed mindset" about who we are and our ability to meet a challenge can be changed to a "growth mindset," which lessens stress, increases energy to act, and enhances productivity.

People with a fixed mindset tend to believe that their abilities are set and nothing can change who they are, such as being smart, talented or strong. When faced with

setbacks that challenge their view of themselves, they often feel conflict and stress. It is an either-or thinking pattern that contributes to avoidance, blame, lying, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Dweck's research found that fixed mindset thinkers were reluctant to take on challenging projects again after initially having bad experiences. This sets the stage for procrastination. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, understand that talents and abilities can be developed, and are a function of effort. Setbacks are seen as opportunities for growth. They have an inner sense of trust that they can rise to the challenge, and learn from their mistakes. They are motivated by intrinsic rewards, compared to fixed mindset people who look outward for validation. Growth mindset people are less vulnerable to enlisting maladaptive coping mechanisms such as procrastination.

It is hopeful to note that mindset can be changed and procrastination can be overcome. An effective approach for moving to a growth mindset perspective and diminishing writer's block is to 1) list your strengths or examples of how your writing has grown and improved, and 2) recall concrete incidents in the past when a challenging writing experience became an accomplishment. Placing in your work area specific symbols of successes can anchor you to certain truths and help you cross-examine negative self-talk. You can also express gratitude for the resources you do have to support you. This can build a sense of self-compassion and capacity to accept all of what you are experiencing. Martin Seligman, a psychologist who has pioneered the field of positive psychology, wrote in an essay entitled "Why Lawyers are Unhappy,"¹¹ "Much of the unhappiness of lawyers can be cured. It stems from three causes: (1) Lawyers are selected for their pessimism (or "prudence") and this generalizes to the rest of their lives; (2) Law jobs are characterized by high pressure and low decision latitude, exactly the conditions that promote poor health and poor morale; and (3) ...[L]aw is a zero-sum game," which fosters win or lose thinking and competition at all costs. In a profession with these conditions and that requires writing on demand, in isolation, and with high stakes consequences, it is predictable that writer's block can happen.

David Rasch provides in his book *The Blocked Writer's Book of the Dead* many useful techniques and assessment tools for overcoming writer's block. One point he emphasizes is the importance of an environment that optimizes the "Write Place, Write Time." How comfortable you are in your workspace may have a lot to do with whether you wander – not only in your head – but away from your work area.

For instance, one factor that kept me from writing this article was that for several months I had spent long hours

at my computer working on lengthy investigation reports. My work area, my attitude and my body needed serious adjusting. I replaced my old chair with one that optimized my alignment. I organized my desk, cleaned out several file cabinets, shredded a truckload of paper, and even color-coded the books in my bookcases. I obviously found time for these projects, but starting this article still eluded me. Through mindfulness practices and journaling, I became aware of the thoughts filling my mind with stressful propaganda about how I had to write a “perfect” article and “it would likely take too much time.”

Research¹² confirms that techniques emphasizing reward, motivation and autonomy can build attention skills and create positive feelings that encourage productivity. One of the techniques that ultimately helped kickstart me into action involved my listing all the reasons WHY writing this article had meaning for me. Anchoring my attention on my purpose for writing this article, which is to explore all forms of well-being practices and share them with others, helped me realize I had a choice. I could direct attention to my negative thinking about the “I-don’t-have-enough-time-and-it-must-be-perfect” future, OR focus on what I identified as a heartfelt purpose right now. Aligning with what was rewarding to me created the impetus to take a first step and start writing what you are now reading.

Daniel Bowling, a professor at Duke University School of Law, concludes in an essay entitled *Lawyers and Their Elusive Pursuit of Happiness – Does it Matter?*: “If more lawyers re-discover why they became lawyers in the first place and rededicate themselves to those intrinsic goals we will have a happier, healthier and more ethical profession.”

In closing, I offer the following attention and presence practice the next time you find yourself wanting to write, but too overwhelmed or distracted to start.

First, state out loud what your writing goal is and why it is meaningful to you in simple, specific, and realistic terms.

Second, identify the next step that you need to take. Focus on a concrete, easy-to-accomplish first-step you can take right now. Don’t resist any thoughts about the finished result but gently let them float away like clouds passing.

Third, bring your attention to those parts of your body where you are holding tension. Imagine your breath coming in and out of these areas. With each breath soften and release.

Fourth, look around at your surroundings and notice – one by one – three objects that you see. Do this with an attitude of curiosity as if you are observing these objects for the first time.

Fifth, close your eyes and notice three sounds that you hear. Fully attend to each sound as you feel yourself breathe.

Sixth, notice your breathing specifically. What is moving as you breathe? Feel how being aware of your breathing calms you. Just rest your attention on your breathing for a few moments.

Seventh, open your eyes and take that first step. *Carpe diem!*

Remember this: If you are in the grip of procrastination, there are practices and techniques that can help. Know that writer’s block is not uncommon and not a malady. Even Dorothy Parker, a famous writer, once said, “I hate writing. I love having written.” And if you would like to hear a funny procrastination joke I just read... I’ll tell you later. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Techniques to try: 1) Take a Specific Small Next Step 2) List Your Strengths and Past Successes, 3) Recognize and Reframe Your Thoughts, 4) Optimize Your Work Environment, 5) Align with the Why, 6) Practice Attention and Presence.
- 2 *Overcoming Writers’ Block and Procrastination for Attorneys, Law Students and Law Professors*, New Mexico Law Review, 43 N.M. L. Rev 193, (Spring 2013), David Rasch, Ph.D., Meehan Rasch, J.D. Contact info for David Rasch is davidarnotrasch@gmail.com.
- 3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Lazarus
- 4 Dr. Timothy Pychyl’s research at Procrastination.ca
- 5 *Mind: A Journey to the Heart of Being Human* by Daniel J. Siegel, © 2017. Of note: Dr. Siegel is speaking locally in Santa Barbara on December 13, 2019 at the Consciousness Network regarding his new book: *Aware: The Science and Practice of Presence*; <https://consciousnessnetwork.org>
- 6 https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_reframing_and_restructuring.
- 7 *The “Work”* by Byron Katie; <https://thework.com/>; *Who Would you Be Without Your Story?* by Byron Katie, © 2008; *Question Your Thinking, Change the World* by Byron Katie, © 2007;
- 8 Psychological mechanisms driving stress resilience in mindfulness training: A randomized controlled trial, *Health Psychology*; (2019 Aug.); Chin B, Lindsay EK, Greco CM, Brown KW, Smyth JM, Wright AGC, Creswell JD <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/31120272>
- 9 Dr. Sara Lazar’s research at https://scholar.harvard.edu/sara_lazar/publications.
- 10 Dr. Carol Dweck’s research at https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/14808970_Carol_S_Dweck.
- 11 *Why Lawyers are Unhappy*, Martin Seligman, Paul Verkuil, Terry Kang (April 2005) <http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/DeakinLawRw/2005/4.html>
- 12 Esterman, M., Reagan, A., Liu, G., Turner, C., & DeGutis, J. (2014). Reward reveals dissociable aspects of sustained attention, *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 143(6), 2287-2295.