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## Wisdom From The (Not So Secret) Order of The Titanides: Vol. 8

### Why Put Off Until Tomorrow What You Could Put Off Until Next Week?

[My epic decade-long battle with procrastination and what I've learned from it.](#)



*All my life I've struggled with procrastination. I struggle with procrastination the way an addict struggles with cocaine. Procrastination is my drug of choice. I relapse constantly and just can't seem to stay clean.*

*As you know, I live with several family members in recovery. This is not meant to downplay or disrespect their struggle. Many times, I've wished I could stop procrastinating cold turkey the way my husband, Tom stopped drinking. I'm in awe of his ability to stay clean.*

*And just like an addict, I beat myself up and blame myself and feel like crap when I relapse.*

*One of my mentors, David Deutsch, nicknamed me "Lucy" after the character in Charlie Brown. Because I'm always "pulling the football away" at the last minute. I'll say, "You'll have the copy in the morning..." and then five days later, David is still waiting for it.*

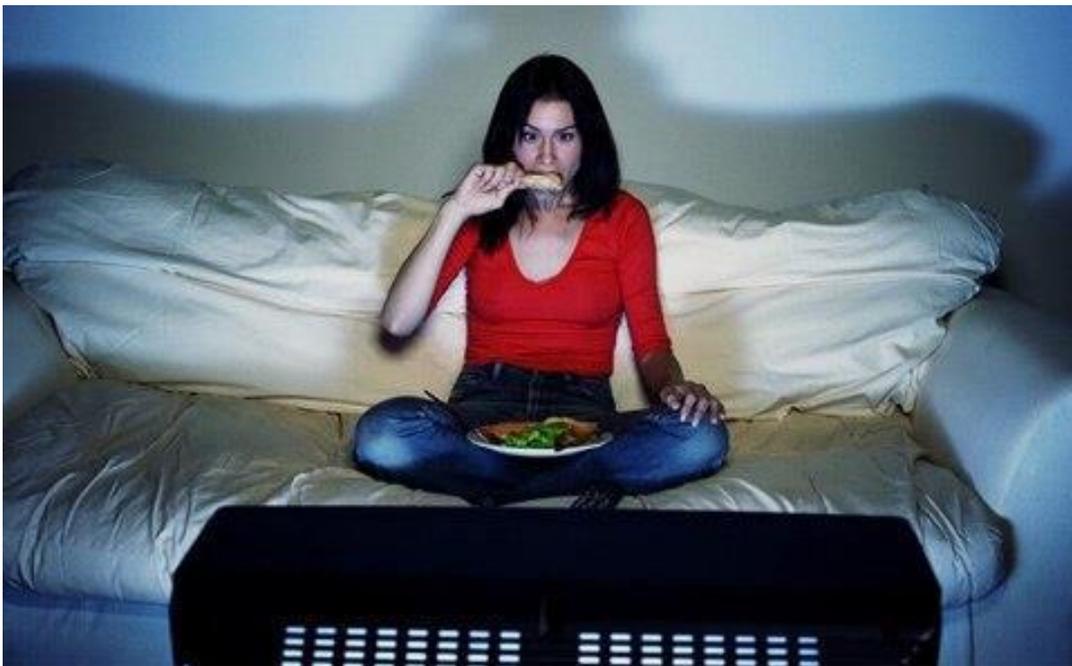
I've lost clients over my procrastination problem. I've lost team members and driven colleagues insane. I've lost precious time with my friends and family that I can never get back.

Once I spent a week of vacation with my son and his friends at the beach in South Carolina holed up in my bedroom writing because I was so late on a project. I never even made it to the ocean until the last day.

I've carried work with me around the world. I've procrastinated in Paris, France, Sedgefield, South Africa, Santorini, Greece... you name it.

I will read trashy romance novels... binge watch Grey's Anatomy on Netflix... run senseless errands at Target... buy stuff I don't need on Amazon... and consume massive quantities of sugar and fried foods...all just to avoid writing. Oh, and Tom gets lucky a lot when I procrastinate too.

I procrastinate until the deadline is right on top of me and then I drop everything – family, vacation, sanity, sleep – just to finish the project. It's an all or nothing proposition. Procrastinate until the last minute then sacrifice everything and write like a bat out of hell, living on Snickers bars and Red Bull for the next three weeks.



### **If You're a Procrastinator Like Me, It Could be Killing You**

All this procrastination is killing me... literally. In fact, I just read research that shows chronic procrastination destroys your physical and mental health. Procrastination leads to depression, anxiety, and general dissatisfaction. It's linked to chronic illness like hypertension and heart disease.

Personally, I've gained 20 pounds and given myself more panic attacks than I can count over the years. I wake up each morning in a cold sweat, freaking out about what I didn't do yesterday and anxious about what I need to do today. It's a miserable way to live.

Dealing with procrastination isn't just about being more productive. It's about saving your sanity and your health as well.

Now I wish this was some kind of "reformed whore" story where I could tell you that I've conquered my procrastination habit and then preach the solution to you. But I can't.

What I can tell you is that I'm getting better. I've learned key coping strategies and they are helping. And I'm going to share them with you and I hope you'll share your ideas with me.

But first, I want to talk about what research shows actually causes us to procrastinate. Because it's NOT what you think...

### **Good News, Fellow Procrastinators! We're Not Just Lazy... and We Don't Lack Self-Control**

The New York Times just ran a great series on taking back your attention. And they included a fascinating article on procrastination called, "Why You Procrastinate (It Has Nothing To Do With Self-Control)". Spoiler alert: It turns out that procrastination has NOTHING to do with being lazy!

Procrastination is its own special kind of mental torture, for masochists only. When you procrastinate, you usually know you are doing it. You know you should be doing the thing that you are avoiding, and you feel guilty as shit. It's completely irrational and can make you think you must be insane. Why do I do this to myself? Why would I knowingly do something that I know is only going to hurt in the long run?

### **The Real Reason We Procrastinate**

Well, according to Dr. Fuschia Sirois, a psychology professor at the University of Sheffield, it turns out the real root cause of procrastination is our "inability to manage negative moods around a task."

In other words, procrastination is not a character flaw. Procrastination is a way of "coping with challenging emotions and negative moods caused by certain tasks."

If you are bored with a project... if you are anxious about how it will be

received... if you are insecure about your ability to do it... if you're frustrated because you can't seem to please your copy chief or client... if you resent having to rewrite the copy yet again... if you are plagued with self-doubt about your writing ability... then you are MORE likely to procrastinate.

As Dr. Tim Pychyl put it, "Procrastination is an emotional regulation problem, not a time management problem." In other words, you might get more help from your shrink than your stopwatch.

Procrastination gurus Dr. Pychyl and Dr. Sirois teamed up on a 2013 study and they discovered that basically procrastination is an attempt to achieve "short-term mood repair."

Basically, you feel anxious or fearful about a project or deadline so you "repair" your negative mood by doing something that gives you a quick hit of dopamine. You buy something you don't need... or you watch funny cat videos on Facebook... or you eat a Big Mac and fries. The result is that you feel better in the short term. Your bad mood is "fixed."

### **The Long-Term Cost of Putting Things Off**

The problem is this repair comes at the cost of your longer-term goal, dream or action. So, you might feel better in the short term if you eat that pint of Graeters black raspberry chip ice cream and binge watch Stranger Things, but you still have to face the client in the morning with the work not done.

Plus, procrastination kicks off a vicious cycle, as you know. The next day you face the email from the client asking where the copy is and you feel worse. You experience MORE stress, anxiety, and self-blame.

There is actually a name for feeling like crap after you've procrastinated. It's called "procrastinatory cognitions." That's a fancy name for all the vicious nasty thoughts we have about ourselves AFTER we procrastinate. Like... "You're an idiot. You can't do this. You're a fraud. You're lazy. And all the other nasty things you tell yourself." As you might guess, these thoughts only make us feel worse. So, of course, we reach for the ice cream and Netflix and the cycle starts all over again.

This is what makes procrastination so damaging to our bodies and our minds. We get stuck beating ourselves up, then we procrastinate for some relief.

Feeling worse, we beat ourselves up more. And the cycle continues. We end up stressed out, 20 pounds overweight, and months behind on deadlines.

## **Why We Avoid Tackling That Looming Task**

The part that makes this so irrational, is that we KNOW that we are only going to feel worse in the long run and yet we do it anyway. That's because according to U.C.L.A. scientists, our brains are hard-wired for present bias. We can't force our present self to do that boring painful task so we make our "future self" do it.

We think of her as some kind of alter ego super woman who won't mind doing the tasks tomorrow that we refuse to do today. In our minds, she's incredibly disciplined, brilliant, hard-working, and will conquer tall buildings in a single bound. "Let her deal with it," we think. And we go back to cruising Facebook, or Instagram, or Twitter.

It's the old saber tooth tiger "fight or flight." Researchers call it the "amygdala hijack," according to The New York Times. The amygdala is our "Watch Out!" early warning system. When we are stressed or anxious or insecure about doing a task, our amygdala treats it like a monster in the basement and starts screaming, "Don't go down those stairs! Stay away!" Our amygdala convinces us it's much safer to retreat to the couch than write those headlines. We could die, I tell you!

So now that you know the bad news... what's the good news? What can we do to stop procrastinating?

(And if you never procrastinate, you always turn your work in on time, and you've never missed a deadline in your life... I've got news for you. Researchers have discovered something called "precrastination." Go ahead and Google it. It's a thing. Turns out turning your work in early could be just as dangerous as turning it in late.)

## **How to Fix the Procrastination Problem**

The bottom line is, if procrastination is an "emotional regulation" problem, then it follows that we need to learn to regulate our emotions better.

So how do you do this?



### **Tip #1: Start Your Day With A Gratitude List**

One proven way to improve your mood and motivation is to make a gratitude list. When I wake up feeling anxious about everything I have to do and how far behind I am... I start with a gratitude list. This helps shift my mood. One tool I use is the Best Self Journal for my daily planning that has a morning and evening gratitude list built in.

### **Tip #2: Practice Self-Forgiveness and Self-Compassion**

One of my favorite books is *The Willpower Instinct* by Kelly McGonigal. She shares how nobody believes her when she says self-forgiveness leads to better willpower. Evidently we're all rather brutal and want to punish ourselves with whips and chains for any slip ups. We believe if we are kind to ourselves, we'll backslide and end up homeless begging for change. But it's simply not true!

All the research shows that self-compassion makes you LESS likely to relapse. Plus it increases your motivation and lowers your stress. It also makes you feel better about yourself and boosts positive emotions like optimism, wisdom, and curiosity, according to The New York Times. So drop the whip and start being nicer to yourself when you stumble.

In another study, Dr. Sirois found that those of us who procrastinate tend to have high levels of stress and low levels of self-compassion. She found that

practicing self-compassion helps protect you from negative emotions. Good to know!

### **Tip #3: Ask Yourself, Are You Being Unrealistic?**

I've come to realize that part of my problem is that I'm always over-booking and over-scheduling. So there is absolutely no margin for error. And no time to rest. That's a perfect set up for disaster.

Instead of beating yourself up for procrastinating and not getting your work done, ask yourself... Is this schedule even human? Build in time to rest, to relax, to blow off work and go fishing, and allow for Murphy's Law too.

### **Tip #4: Be The Scientist**

Another tip I got from *The Willpower Instinct* (and The New York Times article) is to be the scientist. Look at everything as an experiment. Cultivate curiosity without judgment. When you procrastinate, get curious. Ask yourself why? What was going on? What feeling were you trying to avoid?

Try to locate that feeling in your body. Notice it. Where is it? My procrastination trigger is anxiety right in the middle of my chest. Like someone is trying to drill through it. Then make like a Zen monk and simply bring your attention to the physical sensation and breathe into it. You may find that it slowly shifts and you don't have to reach for the chocolate or cocaine at all.

In fact, in *The Willpower Instinct*, McGonigal finds that meditation is one of the few things that can increase your willpower. So the Zen monk trick might just get you back to the desk faster too.

### **Tip #5: You Only Ever Have to Do the Next One Thing**

If you're a procrastinating copywriter, then you've probably suffered through advice like... Break it down into small steps. Do an outline. Make a research document. Use a timer to write. Etc., etc.

But if the problem is you're too anxious and terrified even to start, that's not going to help at all.

Instead try asking yourself, "What is the one next thing I could do?" It could be as simple as open the document or name the file or read this page. When I'm

struggling with writing a draft and I'm feeling completely overwhelmed and I want to run away, I try to tell myself, "You just have to write one sentence," or "You just have to type the next word."

### **Tip #6: Make It Harder to Reach**

Gretchen Rubin, author of *Better Than Before: What I Learned About Making and Breaking Habits*, suggests the age-old trick of making your temptations harder to reach. Love procrastinating with Amazon? Kill the one-click order button and make your Amazon password more complicated than a nuclear launch code and do NOT let Google memorize it for you.

The idea is to give your brain long enough to pause so that the feeling will pass. I also suggest taking the dog for a walk or doing a load of laundry to clear your head before giving into temptation.

### **Tip #7: Take Drugs**

Not that kind! I'm talking about anti-anxiety medications. I've taken prescription medications in the past, but I gained a ton of weight. Now I take an herbal supplement called Serenia that takes the edge off. I've also experimented with CBD oil, which seemed to help. And I avoid caffeine if I can because it only ratchets up my anxiety to heart palpitating levels.

### **Tip #8: Turn It Over To the Good Orderly Direction**

One thing I've learned from all the Al-Anon and AA meetings I've attended is to "turn it over to God" or what I call the "Good Orderly Direction." When you're overwhelmed and stressed out and you don't know what to do next, practice just letting go and turning it over to the universe and asking for help. Not only does this lower your stress level, but you'll be amazed how many great resources show up when you get out of your own way.

### **Tip #9: Work With Crazy People Who Always Meet Deadlines**

If you're a chronic procrastinator like me, then put people on your team who never miss a deadline. They will push you and keep you on track. They'll hound you and refuse to let you hide. You'll also drive them insane and that can be an issue. But hopefully, you can find some balance and help each other.

I've slowly learned to confide in my mentors and tell them when I'm melting

down. I explain my fear and anxiety and why I'm unable to write or make progress. I don't do this with all of my mentors or clients obviously. Only those I really trust. But it helps. David now jokingly texts me things like, "How's it coming Lucy? Anything I can do to help?" He gets me.

So there you have it. That's all I've learned about overcoming procrastination in the past decade or so. I hope some of these tips will be helpful to you. I'll post this in the Titanides Facebook group and we can start a thread.

And you can always confess your darkest procrastination secrets to me, and I won't judge. Maybe we could set up a Titanides Procrastination hotline or a WhatsApp channel for confessions.

We could practice forgiving ourselves and others. Think of it like a confessional. I will absolve you of your guilt and shame. I forgive you. You forgive me. I forgive me. We forgive all of us. We are only human after all.

Love,

Marcella

If you find these monthly musing helpful or inspiring or at least procrastination entertainment worthy...then I hope you'll consider becoming a sustaining member of the Titanides today. It takes a small but fierce and mighty circle of women to keep this "not so secret" order of the Titanides going.

**[BECOME A MEMBER TODAY](#)**

And if you're already a member, THANK YOU, a million times over. You make it possible for me to procrastinate in the best possible way by doing the thing I love best and leading the Titanides.

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