

Procrastination: Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

Unhelpful Rules & Assumptions

The reason people procrastinate, is because they hold unhelpful rules and assumptions about themselves or how the world works. These unhelpful rules and assumptions often generate some form of discomfort about doing a task or goal (e.g., anger, resentment, frustration, boredom, anxiety, fear, embarrassment, depression, despair, exhaustion, etc), and procrastination then becomes a strategy to avoid the discomfort.

The unhelpful rules and assumptions most often linked to procrastination are:

Needing To Be In Charge (e.g., “Things should be done my way. I shouldn’t have to do things I don’t want to, or just because someone else says so”);

Pleasure Seeking (e.g., “Life’s too short to be doing things that are boring or hard, fun should always come first”);

Fear Of Failure Or Disapproval (e.g., “I must do things perfectly, otherwise I will fail or others will think badly of me”);

Fear Of Uncertainty Or Catastrophe (e.g., “I must be certain of what will happen. What if it’s bad? I am better off not doing anything than risking it”);

Low Self-Confidence (e.g., “I can’t do it. I am just too incapable and inadequate”); and

Depleted Energy (e.g., “I can’t do things when I am stressed, fatigued, unmotivated, or depressed”).

Adjusting Rules & Assumptions

There are a series of steps you can go through to challenge and adjust the unhelpful rules and assumptions that give rise to your procrastination. This involves asking yourself the following questions:

- What is the unhelpful rule or assumption I would like to adjust?
- Where did this rule or assumption come from?
- In what ways is this rule or assumption unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?
- What are the negative consequences of having this rule or assumption?
- What is an alternative more helpful (i.e., balanced, flexible, realistic) rule or assumption?
- What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice on a daily basis?

If you hold more than one unhelpful rule or assumption, tackle each one at a time.

When working out where your rules and assumptions might have come from, this will often be from messages or sayings you have received from others around you, past experiences you have had, or how you have observed others approach life. Often these things will have occurred whilst growing up, but can also come from more recent experiences.

When generating a more helpful rule or assumption, this involves thinking of another way to see yourself and the world that is more balanced, flexible to different circumstances, and realistic given the real state of affairs.

When thinking of how to put the new rule or assumption into practice, this involves working out how you would act in everyday life if you already believed the new helpful rule or assumption, and then making a point of acting that way. Often when we act as if something were true, we actually start to believe it.

Example

What is your unhelpful rule or assumption ?

Things should be done my way

Where did it come from?

Messages I received growing up from family (e.g., “it’s my way or the highway”) and past experiences of being dominated by others, and vowing never to be in that same position again.

In what ways is it unreasonable? unrealistic? unfair? unhelpful?

It is simply not possible to have everything my way.

What are its negative consequences ?

I alienate others, it creates conflict with people.

What is an alternative more helpful rule or assumption? Things don’t have to always be my way

What can I do to put this rule or assumption into practice? *Follow someone else’s orders. Do things I don’t want to for a change.*



A Final Note...

It is important to remember that adjusting your unhelpful rules and assumptions is not always necessary to beat the habit of procrastination. Often *Dismissing Procrastination Excuses* and using *Practical Strategies to Stop Procrastination* (see relevant information sheets) is enough. The unhelpful rules and assumptions underlying your procrastination are harder to shift because they have been with you a long time, and hence may require more intensive work. This sheet provides you with some tips to help get you started on the process.