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Jennifer Boster is a licensed social worker at the Heartland Wellness Center in Lowell.

# FEAR FACTOR

Procrastination is often a sign of anxiety, and there are ways to tackle it

**MARK LOEHRKE**

**I**t happens to the best of us. An assignment gets pushed from one day's to-do list to the next. A household chore gets shuffled down the agenda. A phone call gets bumped to a "more convenient time."

Procrastination is a nearly universal

— and in most cases completely normal —human behavior. We see an unpleasant or difficult task ahead of us and almost instinctively look for a way to put it off until another time (a time that, in many cases, we hope never comes). But while procrastination may seem to observers and practitioners like a simple case of laziness, it can be, for others, a more serious psychological struggle with fear.

"Procrastination is an avoidance coping mechanism, a symptom of an underlying mental health variable," explains Jennifer Boster, a licensed social worker at the Heartland Wellness Center in Lowell. "If we look at anxiety as fear on steroids, what happens when fear becomes so strong is we go into fight-or-flight mode. Procrastination is when the subconscious sees a task so

overwhelming, the individual becomes in a sense paralyzed by fear."

Boster says that while occasional procrastination may not be the most responsible or healthy coping mechanism, it does help a person feel safe for a brief period — the task has been delayed and we've bought some additional time. But for those with heightened anxiety, that emotion left unprocessed tends to grow, turning everyday tasks into something scarier and more threatening. Suddenly, seemingly routine tasks such as doing the laundry, opening mail, answering text messages, paying bills or completing an assignment on time take on greater psychological weight.

"The emotional energy needed to do these tasks and the fear of not having the amount of energy, knowledge, understanding or time becomes overwhelming," Boster says, noting that individuals with ADHD often struggle with behavioral patterns such as procrastination due to their hyperawareness of the micro steps involved in daily tasks. "This cognitive process leads to the notion of even beginning the task at hand becoming a trigger in and of itself."

Beyond those with ADHD, Heather Plinovich says individuals dealing with severe anxiety issues are also prone to procrastination because they tend to overestimate the probability of a bad outcome and underestimate their ability to cope. The founder and director of the Anxiety & OCD Behavioral Health Center in Schererville says those suffering from depression often struggle with procrastination as well, reasoning that there's no point in completing a task when they believe themselves to be worthless and living in a futile and unforgiving world with a hopeless future. But even in less extreme cases than these, Plinovich notes that persistent procrastination can, over time, cause problems.

"Procrastination can become a problem, even pathological, if it significantly interferes with one's physical and mental well-being or one's quality of life," she says. "This is because the person experiences ever-increasing



**Heather Plinovich is founder and director of the Anxiety & OCD Behavioral Health Center in Schererville.**

commitments pile up and multiply over time.”

Boster and Plinovich agree that the key to overcoming procrastination lies in convincing oneself that the task at hand isn't nearly as scary as it seems. While that may be easier said than done, there are a number of ways to train the brain in this direction, including:

- Breaking jobs down into 15-minute tasks and adjusting the thinking that a job must be completed from start to finish. “A lot of times the overwhelming thought of completing a task completely prevents us from even starting the task,” Boster says.

- Identifying goals that are “SMART” – specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound. “Concrete goals can enhance productivity, as they provide feedback that can correct performance and reinforce the intended behavior,” says Plinovich.

- Using positive self-talk to devise a plan for handling risks of procrastination by saying to oneself, “If X happens, then I will do Y.” This will help limit the number of decisions to be made.

- Preventing distractions by removing anything that can interfere with the start or completion of a task, such as disabling notifications on the computer or phone, using designated work areas or configuring settings to limit the use of certain apps or social media while working.

- Increasing automaticity by scheduling routines (such as a designated place, time and course of action) whenever possible to increase the likelihood of task completion.

Above all, Boster says, it's important to be understanding of what someone (including the person in the mirror) is going through when they're procrastinating, because reflexively calling it laziness is, well, kind of lazy.

“Remember that those who procrastinate are not just doing it to make their lives easier. They are doing it (whether they're aware or not) because the task at hand seems too overwhelming to handle,” she says. “In other words, procrastination should not be viewed as a flaw in someone's character, but rather a spotlight that that person may be struggling.”

## THE MEDICAL REPORT

# Building trust through community outreach is key to minority health gains

**W**hen it comes to the relationship between patient and health-care provider, trust is key.

For minority populations, who have disproportionate levels of medically manageable diseases, mistrust of the health-care industry as a whole has been linked to higher mortality rates.

April is National Minority Health Month, which aims to raise awareness about the health disparities that continue to affect racial and ethnic minority groups and to encourage action through health education and early detection and control of disease complications.

Understanding some of the reasons for the mistrust is key to addressing them.

The issue is referred to as the Tuskegee Effect, a distrust of health-care in the African American community linked to the U.S. government's secret 40-year study of hundreds of adult Black men in Alabama left untreated for syphilis from 1932 to 1972, despite the availability of treatment.

A 2016 study in the National Bureau of Economic Research found the Tuskegee Effect was strongest among adult Black males, who were less likely than their white counterparts to be examined by doctors and subsequently suffered higher mortality rates. Another study published in the *Annals of Family Medicine* in 2021 found that Black and Hispanic participants were 73% and 49% more likely, respectively, than their white counterparts to report mistrust in health professionals.

At the same time, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Black adults are 60% more likely than white adults to be diagnosed with diabetes and 40% more likely to have high blood pressure and are less likely to have those conditions under control.

The Indiana State Department of Health reports Black men have the highest mortality rate of any demographic in Indiana.

Franciscan Health will participate in the 11th Annual Indiana Black Barbershop Health Initiative with the Indiana Commission on the Social Status of Black Males. The program, which wraps up this month, brings blood-pressure, blood glucose and body-mass index screenings to Michigan City barbershops.

Similarly, culturally competent health care for diverse populations requires sensitivity to spirituality as a component of the individual's cultural identity as well. Franciscan Health Michigan City's Fan Out Diabetes program is a faith-based initiative that pairs LaPorte County church congregations with the health-care system to bring free education, screenings, insurance enrollment assistance and more to churches after Sunday services.

The two-day diabetes education, prevention and detection mini-workshop will take place at Advancing Christ's Kingdom Ministries at 1407 E. Michigan Blvd., Michigan City, at 2 p.m. July 9 and 12:30 p.m. July 30. Participants are asked to attend both sessions.

Partnering health-care providers with cultural institutions that have the trust of minority populations, such as Black-owned barbershops and minority-led houses of worship, is one way to help improve health outcomes. We are thankful for the opportunities to help us reach our ultimate goal of a healthier community.



**Nila Williams**

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