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The Mental Edge: Don't delay — overcome procrastination today

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I am excited to introduce The Mental Edge, a column about psychology and personal growth. I hope this column can help you to make some meaningful changes in your life. My goal is to lay out some powerful concepts and strategies that could affect your emotions, thoughts, and behavior in a way that leads to enhanced well-being.

In particular, I hope to give you some new ideas about ways of relating to yourself and others.

In each column, I will give you something that you can experiment with in your own life. Though I will base my strategies on proven psychological principles, we learn best by trying things out for ourselves and making them our own.

There are a number of topics I look forward to addressing, though I am eager for your feedback about the psychological topics and issues you would like to see covered.

There are a number of ways of carving out our terrain. We need to address emotional issues: how to build happiness and respond to sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, and shame.

We need to discuss relationships: how to build a solid support system, how to deepen intimacy with a partner, and how to set limits and protect yourself with more difficult people.

We can discuss ways of managing yourself: getting things done that you tend to avoid, setting ambitious goals, and managing unhealthy impulses.

We can also cover issues of self-esteem, self-acceptance and how to have a good, clear sense of your strengths and weaknesses.

Psychological issues and strategies can affect an incredibly broad expanse of our lives.

Ben Johnson

Avoidance is a core process in our lives. Avoidance means not dealing with something or procrastinating about it. Though there is such a thing as “healthy avoidance,” in which it really is in your best interest not to deal with something right now, problematic avoidance is much more common.

People avoid all sorts of things. Some people avoid filing their taxes or looking at their bank statement. Many people avoid social situations. They might avoid attending a party because they dread making small talk. People avoid bridges, elevators and going to the doctor.

There is no shortage of places, subjects or emotions that can be avoided. If it is hard to face, people have found a way not to deal with it.

One of the big problems with avoidance and procrastination is that it works. In the short term, deciding that tomorrow is better than today immediately reduces anxiety.

We often find great, rational, compelling reasons why “later” makes sense. “I’m too tired now.” “I can’t think until I clean off my desk.” “I’ll just check my e-mail first.” We make big promises to ourselves about how we are going to go to the next party, work on the paper tomorrow, clean the house for eight hours — another time.

We give ourselves permission not to do it now, and we are often highly appreciative.

Sometimes you might not even realize you are avoiding. Avoidance can become such a way of life that you don’t even question it anymore. If you haven’t gone to the first three holiday parties for your workplace, then you probably won’t even contemplate going to the fourth.

In the long run, avoidance robs people of their mental health. It is a freedom stealer. Problems become bigger and harder to

face. Doing one year of taxes is hard. Getting the paperwork together to do six years' worth is overwhelming.

To overcome avoidant patterns, we first need to become acutely aware of them. You need to call yourself on it when you have the urge not to deal.

When you are saying “later,” “tomorrow,” or “when I am up to it,” you need to label your avoidant instinct. Acknowledging the avoidant urge is a big step toward taking control of the pattern.

You need to make “now” your friend. A little now. Some now. Five minutes facing it — not later — now! Identifying the first behavioral step is crucial.

What exactly would I do if I were to face it? Would I send an e-mail, make a phone call, or wash one dish? Sometimes we just need to trick ourselves into it. “I don't have to want to face it — I just need to crack the ice on the issue.” We say in behavior therapy that motivation follows action: We can't wait until we feel like doing it or it may never get done.

Sometimes the key is giving words to your fears. Identifying exactly what you are scared you will feel, or what you think will happen can help a lot. You might realize upon careful self-analysis that you are scared of losing control, being rejected or failing.

Once you have words for the feared consequences, you can reality test your fears. For example, when you think about calling an old friend and realize you expect rejection, you might be able to remind yourself that the odds they would feel complimented are high.

You will actually be able to handle the disappointment if they are less than friendly. You can consider multiple explanations for things and tolerate the uncertainty that is so much a part of life and relationships anyway.

I would like to propose choosing one thing this week to approach repeatedly that you want to face.

If you avoid social situations, you might identify one funny story to tell to others when you get the chance. If you avoid exercise, you might try doing one pushup.

If there is a project you wish you could face, practice initiating it. Open up the file for five minutes, without the commitment of having to work on it. Just sit there, look at it, and let yourself feel whatever you feel without judging it. Then celebrate your efforts to face things. It is the effort that matters.

So, watch out for those avoidant patterns. Let me know how you fare in your courageous effort to face things .

Ben Johnson, Ph.D., ABPP, is a clinical psychologist who teaches, supervises and practices at Brown University, the University of Rhode Island and RICBT, a cognitive behavioral therapy and coaching practice. He loves helping people apply a broad range of psychological concepts and strategies to reduce isolation and improve their moods, relationships, productivity and lives.

Please send comments to Features@providencejournal.com; be sure to put “Mental Edge” in the subject field. You may also write to Mental Edge, Features Department, The Providence Journal, 75 Fountain St., Providence RI 02902.



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