

Tackling Procrastination: An REBT Perspective for Coaches

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Abstract Coaching makes exciting claims about helping clients to realize their potential but the ‘unexciting’ side of coaching is often tackling the same goal-blocking problems found in therapy. REBT can be used by coaches to extend and deepen their understanding of psychological issues such as procrastination which is the subject of this article. A definition of procrastination is offered along with views on what causes it and descriptions of six fundamental procrastination styles. A coaching case study is used to guide the reader through the ABCDE model of psychological disturbance and change as well as examining some of the pitfalls involved in tackling procrastination.

Keywords Coaching · Procrastination · Rational emotive behaviour therapy

Introduction

Coaching aims to bring out the best in people in order to help them achieve their desired goals. While a lot of the coaching literature is full of exciting promises of unleashing your potential, reinventing yourself or living your dream life by implementing dynamic action plans, the ‘unexciting’ side of coaching can involve tackling some of the usual change-blocking problems familiar to therapists such as perfectionism, procrastination, excessive self-doubt, lack of persistence and self-depreciation. Unless these psychological blocks are overcome, little progress is likely to be made in achieving the client’s coaching goals. Therefore, it is important for coaches, particularly those without a background in psychology, to increase their knowledge of psychological factors that interfere with as well as promote change.

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As Lee observes:

This expansion in scope challenges coaches to be more sophisticated in their understanding of psychology. They need to develop skills and experience that enable them to move more freely between the psychological and practical. They need to understand a wider range of theoretical models and frameworks, and to be able to relate psychological insights to business performance [and personal change]. (2003, p. 2)

A theoretical model for understanding and tackling psychological blocks in general and procrastination in particular is rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT; Ellis 1994), founded in 1955 by Albert Ellis. REBT focuses on the powerful influence our thinking, particularly irrational beliefs in the form of rigid musts and shoulds, has on how we feel and behave in the face of events. The concepts of REBT have been applied for over 30 years to tackling problems in the workplace (Ellis 1972; DiMattia 1991) and, more recently, to challenging clients' self-limiting beliefs in coaching (e.g. Anderson 2002; Grant and Greene 2001; Kodish 2002; Neenan and Dryden 2002a; Peltier 2001; Reivich and Shatté 2002; Zeus and Skiffington 2002).

What is Procrastination?

Procrastination derives from the Latin word *procrastinare* which means 'defer till the morning' and can be described as putting off until later what our better judgement tells us ought (preferably) to be done now and thereby incurring unwanted consequences through such dilatory behaviour. Procrastination needs to be distinguished from planned delay when there are legitimate reasons for postponing action such as collecting more information before making an important decision (though this can segue into procrastination if the person becomes worried about making the wrong decision). Also, it would be wrong to dismiss procrastination as mere laziness because the latter state is a disinclination to exert oneself while the former state frequently involves carrying out tasks, being busy, in order to avoid getting on with the priority task which requires action now. Wessler and Wessler (1980, p. 104) state that 'almost any behaviour can be the object of procrastination'.

Procrastination is often described as 'the thief of time'. As procrastination is, in essence, lack of self-management, a more personal way of describing it is that you are stealing your own time through your continuing inaction (Neenan and Dryden 2002b). Another view of procrastination is that you give away your time free of charge—time that you might pay anything for on your deathbed to stay alive a little longer. So much time can be wasted through procrastination that you might believe you have several lives to lead instead of only one. People who become increasingly frustrated about their procrastination habits fear that they are wasting their lives yet avoid doing what would help them to make more productive use of their time. This is what Knaus (1998, p. 7) calls the fundamental procrastination paradox: 'When we try to buy time by procrastinating, we condemn ourselves to running out of time.'

Some surveys suggest that up to 20% of the adult population is chronically affected by procrastination (Persaud 2005). Procrastination usually occurs in three main areas (Dryden 2000a; Knaus 1998):

1. Personal maintenance means putting off action regarding health, personal cleanliness, housework, finances, personal administration and upkeep of property;
2. Self-development involves putting off action concerning job and social opportunities, personal interests, educational advancement, and finding partners;
3. Honouring commitments to others means hoping that earlier promises made will be forgotten by these others as what was promised now seems burdensome to undertake.

Dryden (2000a) distinguishes between chronic situation-specific procrastination (e.g. constantly missing deadlines for filing tax returns) and chronic cross-situational procrastination which affects a number of important areas of a person's life. Chronic procrastination can have high costs:

It has been associated with depression, guilt, low exam grades, anxiety, neuroticism, irrational thinking, cheating and low self-esteem. As a result, procrastination probably accounts for much of why many never realize their full potential and so it can be an extremely disabling psychological condition. (Persaud 2005, p. 237)

What Stops Productive Action?

Hauck (1982, p. 18) comments that poor self-discipline is an unsurprising human trait as 'avoiding a difficult situation seems like the most natural course to take because we are so easily seduced by immediate satisfactions'. Freeman and DeWolf (1990, p. 234) state that 'immediate enjoyment is what procrastination is all about. Ice cream instead of struggle'. Adair (1988, p. 14) suggests that 'it is the vice of people who like to consider work rather than actually do it'. Dryden (2000b) observes that procrastination is often a behavioural way of protecting yourself from experiencing an unpleasant emotional state such as feeling highly irritated if you start working on a boring task you wish you did not have to do. Sapidin and Maguire (1996, p.10) state that 'procrastination is caused by an internal conflict' and have identified six fundamental procrastination styles:

1. The perfectionist who is reluctant to start or finish a task in case it proves to be less than perfect and therefore is seen to fail in his own and/or others' eyes;
2. The dreamer wants life to go smoothly and avoids difficult challenges. Grandiose ideas are not translated into achievable goals. Ill at ease with daily reality, she retreats into fantasy;
3. The worrier fears things going wrong and being overwhelmed by events (lots of 'What if...?' thinking); risk or change is avoided and he has little confidence in his ability to make decisions or tolerate discomfort;

4. The defier is resistant and argumentative towards others' instructions or suggestions because this means she is being told what to do or other people are trying to control her. An indirect form of defiance is passive-aggressiveness such as saying 'yes' to others' request when the person really means 'no' because she is not prepared to take on the responsibility of doing it within the allotted time;
5. The crisis-maker likes to display bravado in declaring he cannot get motivated until the 11th hour or this is when he does his best work; 'living on the edge' gives him an adrenaline rush. He has a low threshold for boredom in his life. Leaving things until the last minute often means that they don't get done on time or opportunities are missed;
6. The overdoer takes on too much work without establishing what her priorities are; time is managed inefficiently leading to some work not being done or done poorly or finished late.

Sapadin and Maguire (1996) suggest that individuals display a mix of procrastination styles: some are more prominently displayed than others. From the REBT perspective, underpinning these various procrastination styles there are likely to be found ego disturbance and discomfort disturbance beliefs (Dryden and Neenan 2004). Ego disturbance relates to the demands that we impose on ourselves and the consequent negative self-ratings that we make when we fail to live up to our self-imposed demands. An ego disturbance belief likely to be found in perfectionists is 'I must do the task very well or else I'm a failure.' Discomfort disturbance is related to the domain of human comfort and occurs when we make dogmatic commands that comfortable life conditions must exist. A discomfort disturbance belief likely to be found in dreamers is 'I shouldn't have to work hard to fulfil my dreams. I can't stand having to get my mind around all those boring details.' Of course, clients can have both types of beliefs underpinning their procrastination. For example, with perfectionists, as well as fear of failure, some may have discomfort disturbance beliefs related to their need to reach their high standards *effortlessly* (e.g. 'I shouldn't have to struggle!').

The Common Demoninator of Procrastination

According to Dryden and Gordon, the 'one thing all people who procrastinate have in common...is a clear-cut emotional problem' (1993, p. 59). Clients might not be aware of their own emotional problem because of their avoidance behaviour (also known as a safety behaviour) which protects them from experiencing it. In order to 'release' this emotion, clients can face the situation in imagination or in vivo and identify the beliefs maintaining their procrastination by using the ABCs of REBT:

A = activating event – imagining giving a presentation to a group of colleagues
 Critical A = what the client is most troubled/disturbed about regarding the presentation: 'Not being able to answer all of the questions'

B = irrational beliefs: 'I must be able to answer all of the questions because if I can't this will prove I'm a phoney'

C = consequences

emotional: rising anxiety

behavioural: highly agitated

cognitive: dwells on what being exposed as a 'phoney' will do to his reputation and career

By exposing herself in imagination to giving the presentation (A), the client's critical A is located which triggers her irrational beliefs (B) which then largely determines her reactions at C. By delaying the presentation, the client remains 'safe' from being exposed as a 'phoney' but, at the same time, she sees herself as a 'phoney' for avoiding doing something she knows she is good at: 'Phoney if I do and phoney if I don't.'

Some Pitfalls in Tackling Procrastination

The coach may focus on the consequences of her client's procrastination and explore his feelings about it, (e.g. 'I feel really pissed off and guilty about missing the deadline for the report. I'm such a failure because I couldn't deliver on time'), which unwittingly perpetuates the client's procrastination in coaching as the coach spends time helping her client ameliorate his disturbed feelings through cognitive restructuring (i.e. belief change). While this is helpful and may be necessary as a first step if the client is very upset about his inaction, nevertheless the key issue remains uncovered: what held the client back from getting on with the task? This focus on outcome results in what Bishop (2000) calls the 'Post-BC's', i.e. the Beliefs and Consequences related to the continuing procrastination which is treated as an Activating Event. 'In contrast, it is usually better to treat the [procrastination] as a C and to focus on the A's and B's that preceded the C, hence, the Pre-AB's' (Bishop 2000, p. 137). In the above example, to discover what the client said to himself *at* the time in order to delay finishing the report *on* time.

What can seem perplexing to the coach is when his client is asked how she would feel if she got on with the task and replies 'Great', but no action is forthcoming. Why is the client depriving herself of this feeling by her continuing inaction? Anticipating feeling 'great' is insufficiently motivating because the client still has to face starting the task which usually means a discomfort phase to contend with which currently acts as a deterrent to action (e.g. 'There is so much information to sift through. I'll feel overwhelmed, get angry and frustrated and give up'). So it is important for the coach not to take feeling 'great' at face value and thereby expect constructive action to occur—emotional disturbance still blocks the way! Even if his client forces herself to complete this particular task and is relieved once it is finished, her disturbance-inducing thinking is likely to be unmodified (e.g. 'I hated doing do it. I felt terrible. I shouldn't have to put myself through that again'). As Grieger and Boyd (1980, p. 36) point out, focusing on 'practical problems before emotional problems tends to rob clients of their motivation to solve their emotional problems, leaving them more comfortable yet still disturbed'.

Tackling Procrastination

Dryden (2000a) specifies four key stages to overcome procrastination: (1) becoming aware of one's procrastination; (2) developing goal-directed behaviour to carry out currently avoided tasks; (3) making a commitment to tolerate short-term discomfort in order to achieve longer-term gains; and (4) being persistent in maintaining an anti-procrastination outlook. I will use a client from my coaching practice to illustrate his progress through these stages.

Awareness

Paul was a therapist who wanted to move into coaching and enrolled on some courses to learn more about the subject and what further skills he needed to acquire. Having completed the training, he continually put off finding clients to coach saying 'the conditions have to be right before I make my move' and 'maybe I need more training, maybe I'm running before I can walk'. As Knaus says in relation to generating awareness regarding one's present behaviour: 'How do you know when you need to stop doing one thing and start doing something else' (1998, p. 68). One clue to answering this question was Paul's agitation about not 'getting on with it' (i.e. seeking coaching clients) which his rationalizations and specious reasons for the delay could not ease. Imagery is a good technique to 'bypass defenses of rationalization and intellectualization' (Weisharr 1993, p. 117) and therefore I asked Paul to imagine making an immediate start in seeking clients and how did he feel in doing so? He said he felt 'strong anxiety' related to the 'confidence issue'. Driving the anxiety was his irrational belief: 'I must be confident about my coaching abilities before I see any clients because if I don't give value for money, then I'll be a failure.' In REBT terms, a rigid demand (must) leading to an extreme conclusion (self-depreciation) if the must is not met which is likely to be the case as musts are infrequently met (Neenan and Dryden 2002b).

Paul was able to see how his irrational beliefs maintained his procrastination: he was demanding to feel confident *before* taking on coaching clients instead of realizing that confidence develops over time through repeated practice of his coaching skills *with* clients. In other words, he was putting the cart before the horse. However, awareness does not necessarily lead to action as Paul had already read a book on procrastination which he said was very insightful but 'somehow the book didn't give me the kick-start I needed'. Coaching would show him how to self-administer the 'kick-start' and how to keep the process of change going.

Goals

In order to develop an action plan for change, Paul needed to pinpoint a clear, specific, measurable goal that was within his control to achieve. Initially, he said his goal was 'to become a coach' but this was a general directive for change and, if left in those terms, likely to encourage more procrastination by Paul as his gaze

would be on the distant future rather than focused on what needs to be done in the present to get his anti-procrastination plan underway. After discussion, the short-term concrete goal was to 'have at least two fee-paying clients within the next 3 months'.

Commitment

When a client states his goals for change, this does not automatically mean that he has committed himself to carrying out the hard work to achieve these goals. In coaching as well as therapy, some clients want a largely effort-free progress towards their goals. Grieger (1991, p. 60) states that effecting change is 'a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week thing'. While this view may sound extreme, it can be used as a yardstick by clients to measure their level of effort. If clients want to make gains, then they need to embrace the discomfort of working on their problem now in order to feel relatively comfortable later about continuing the work of change (Ellis 2002).

Paul was taught to dispute (D), the next step after the ABCs of the problem have been established, his irrational beliefs by examining their rigid and extreme nature and replacing them with rational beliefs to help reduce the frequency, intensity and duration of his anxiety and thereby manage better his uncertainty about the quality of his coaching skills and giving value for money to prospective clients: 'I would like to feel confident right now about my coaching abilities but I realise that my confidence and ability as a coach will develop over time with practice and it is likely that some, maybe a few, clients may think I'm not value for money. If that happens, I will do my best to learn from these experiences but what I won't do is call myself a failure based on these experiences; instead I will accept myself as a fallible coach and person.' This rational alternative to his irrational belief was lengthy and elaborate as it needed to take a rounded view of his development as a coach in stark contrast to the all or nothing quality of his irrational beliefs. In time, Paul condensed his wordy rational belief to the terse: 'Confidence comes with doing, so get on with it!'

An orderly sequence of goal-directed action steps coupled to timely completion dates was agreed with Paul such as agreeing a minimum number of cold calls to HR departments per week, preparing a coaching brochure, giving a presentation on the benefits of coaching to a local Chamber of Commerce meeting, practising coaching on some willing friends, attending workshops on coaching, seeking advice from experienced coaches. Paul said he would 'try' to carry out these steps. When clients say they'll 'try', this suggests little effort or responsibility on their part to effect change and lacks the commitment that 'doing' denotes (Paul had been trying to overcome his procrastination without success, so it was important not to reproduce in coaching a failed strategy). A way to teach clients the difference between trying and doing is to ask them if at the end of the session they will try to leave the room or actually leave it. Trying will keep them in the room indefinitely while doing means they will have left it in seconds. Doing, coupled with a careful review of what has been done and what needs to be done next, is much more likely to bring

results than trying which can become a vicious circle of constantly reviewing failed attempts at task completion. Paul made himself a doer by implementing his action plan and 'trying' slipped out of his vocabulary after the first few sessions of coaching.

Persistence

It can be easy for some clients to think that an initial surge of productivity in tackling their procrastination heralds the end of their 'I'll do it tomorrow' attitudes. They can easily run out of steam after several days of effort and then find themselves reaching for their familiar excuses for inaction. As Ellis (1991, p. 10) has repeatedly stated: 'The power in people's "willpower" consists of their strong *determination* to change themselves *plus persistent work and practice* to carry out this determination' (italics in original). Paul began to falter with his anti-procrastination plan particularly with regard to cold calling HR departments in local businesses to promote his coaching practice: he made cold calling a 'hot' (i.e. emotionally charged) issue by linking their lack of interest with self-rejection ('It's true I'm a failure because they don't want my services') and insisting that 'working this hard without any [immediate] success is too much to cope with' (discomfort disturbance).

Paul was encouraged to dispute his ego and discomfort disturbance-creating beliefs forcefully and persistently by reminding himself that rebuffs from others were only upsetting if he made them so by personalizing an impersonal process of seeking work and that it was in his longer-term interests to tolerate the present discomfort of working hard to get his coaching practice off the ground. Through such vigorous disputing, Paul was able to refocus his energies on working towards his 3-month goal which, at the end of this period, resulted in three fee-paying clients, one more than he had hoped for. By the end of coaching, he had developed a new and effective (E) rational outlook, the last stage in the ABCDE model of psychological disturbance and change, which accepted the uncertainty and hard work in setting up a coaching practice and without making his worth dependent on the success or failure of this endeavour.

In order to maintain their gains from coaching, clients need to develop a 'maintenance message' which is a 'lifelong responsibility to protect your progress from your own forgetfulness, inaction or neglect' (Neenan and Dryden 2006, p. 75). Clients can spend a few minutes every day going over the benefits of their new message; additionally, procrastination is likely to reappear from time to time and this can be dealt with by clients searching for the rigid 'musts' and 'shoulds' that have slipped back into their thinking such as the anxiety-inducing, 'I must give a perfect performance otherwise I'll lose my credibility as an expert' which results in the client's delay in giving a firm date for his presentation.

Paul's maintenance message was: 'My time is precious. Don't waste it!' Paul's vulnerability to future episodes of procrastination was likely to be his doubts about his confidence and competence as a coach particularly if a client was dissatisfied with his performance or cancelled appointments: 'I should be a better coach than I

am then this wouldn't happen.' He needed to remind himself forcefully on these occasions that no coach is immune from client dissatisfaction or cancellation and that the criteria for evaluating his performance should be reasonable and realistic rather than grandiose ('I should feel really confident all the time and have all the answers to the clients' questions'). His longer-term coaching goal was to develop his coaching practice so that eventually there would be a 60–40% split between his coaching and therapy clients respectively. Booster sessions were agreed to monitor Paul's progress towards this goal.

Conclusion

Often the same problems appear in coaching as in therapy. This article has focused on the all-too common problem of procrastination and how REBT can help coaches, particularly those without a psychological background, to understand both the factors maintaining it and what needs to be done to overcome it. To change a behavioural pattern like procrastination 'requires *work*, and typically lots of it. Ironic as it may seem, the problem of avoiding work can only be solved by doing *more work*' (Knaus 1993, Sect. II, p. 37; italics in original). This involves uncovering and then disputing vigorously the irrational beliefs which insist that a task or situation, for whatever reason, is too difficult to face. By internalizing an anti-procrastination outlook, clients are then much less likely to squander their time—an irreplaceable resource unlike cars, food or clothes—and, instead, harness it to the realization of important life goals.

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