

Pandemic Procrastination Requires Self-Compassion

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

In the years I've been writing for this magazine, I've written about being unable to work due to depression or exhaustion or both.

To address this topic, I wrote a column called "Do One Thing" for *WIHE* 28.2 (January 2019). In it I gave the advice that, when your to-do list is swallowing you whole, when everything seems too hard, when your day seems terrible, if you can do *just one thing*, you will feel better because you will be one thing less in the hole.

And then maybe that one thing will give you the energy to do one more thing. Or maybe you will stop at one thing, which is just fine. The point is that doing just one thing is better than doing nothing for your mental health and life.

Pandemic-Plus

Right now, my mind is full of ideas—books I want to write and essays I want to publish. I have a new course I'm teaching soon and a new book coming out. There's a lot on my plate, and I'm thrilled about it.

But I'm also exhausted, drained and fuzzy-headed. Part of the problem is the strain of the ongoing pandemic. Part of the problem is an acute illness that started in December that, after these months, has crossed the line into chronic. Being sick has been so exhausting. Even as I'm getting better, which I am, I still have to manage appointments, insurance and pharmacy runs—so many extra things that I didn't have to worry about before. And I'm not the only one in a state of "Pandemic-Plus," where the crises and intense moments that arise in the course of normal life take on a hellish valence because of COVID-19.

Friends are getting divorced, having babies, losing parents and more, things that would be hard already. Today, though, these events seem nearly insurmountable.

You know these things already. We've been living like this for a year.

If you are also in a state of Pandemic-Plus, then you understand what I'm talking about. You have a big project at work, and you're thrilled to start it...but thinking about it makes you exhausted. You are excited to prep for a new course this semester, and when you sit down to design your syllabus, you just want to lie down on the floor.

Where does the energy go? It's there, and then it isn't.

Pandemic Procrastination

What we're doing is a type of procrastinating. Generally, I am not a procrastinator. And yet, I've become one. Procrastination wrecks your mental health. That's what "Do One Thing" was all about. But what is happening to me, to us, now is different. I want to call this "Pandemic Procrastination." What do we do about it?

When this inspiration-energy-suck first started happening to me, I got frustrated at myself for procrastinat-

ing. I was looking forward to the work. I made it all the way to my desk. I sat down—and then it was like the bottom fell out of the energy bucket without any logic or explanation. Then, I started to feel bad about myself. I couldn't bring myself to do the work that I wanted to do—and so I couldn't bring myself to do the work that I was *required* to do. I got stuck in an awful cycle of lying on the sofa and staring at the ceiling, while hating myself for doing so.

According to a 2016 study, "Procrastination and Depression from a Cognitive Perspective" in the *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, procrastination is "the voluntary delay of an intended act despite the awareness that this needless delay will be detrimental in the longer term." As I lay on the sofa, I knew that avoiding the work I loved *and* the work I had to do would be detrimental. I felt like the homeowner who gets foreclosed on in the beginning of the *House of Sand and Fog* (2003). I couldn't even open the mail. I'd talk on the phone with my friends who felt the same way. They couldn't do basic tasks either.

The problem with procrastination is that it makes everything worse: It creates an ugly cycle. The 2016 study noted that procrastinators "have a chronic tendency to cognitively dwell on their dysphoric feelings and on negative self-relevant information in a way that may keep self-doubts salient." In short, when we procrastinate, we focus on the bad stuff, which makes us feel terrible about ourselves. The study also noted that procrastinators also have really bad feelings about their "self-efficacy." Self-efficacy is the belief in your ability to get something done, whatever that something is.

So, how do we fix it? How do we get off the bed-floor-sofa and stop hating ourselves?

That's what "Do One Thing" was getting at. If you do one thing, then your self-efficacy improves. Hooray! You've done something! Sometimes, that boost to your self-efficacy is enough to get you off the couch. Or not. But at least you've done something, and you feel better about yourself.

But I've found that doing one thing is not enough in Pandemic-Plus. We're fighting a really big battle now. We need something more.

Self-Compassion

Luckily, the study has a really good answer, one that is also really obvious, but still, really good. Procrastinators "tend to be low in self-compassion." However, "individuals who reported high procrastination but who also forgave themselves (an act of self-compassion) were less likely to procrastinate on the same task in the future than those who reported a lack of forgiveness."

Self-compassion. Forgiveness. As I read this study, full of jargon (as it should be, not criticizing), the glorious

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contribute or something important to learn.”

Focused on Advocacy

Her partner, a documentary filmmaker, creates films that require a great deal of research. Early on in their relationship, Duncan got involved in her partner’s film project in Southeast Asia.

“Film is so much more affective,” she said of the medium. Doing some of the film’s interviews, she ended up joining the team. Duncan later collaborated with her partner on another film. But the intensive work involved in the craft has her determined to just be an audience member and remain focused on being a strong advocate for women. 📖

IN HER OWN WORDS: Georgia Southern Partners with Girl Scouts on STEM Center, *continued from page 6*

grants to get faculty and students to conduct research. Gajdosik-Nivens and a former GSU dean wrote and were awarded a \$1 million National Science Foundation grant to “take undergraduate research to the next level.”

The grant provided visibility on campus; subsequently, Gajdosik-Nivens was tapped to become an assistant dean and later an associate provost supervising first-year programs and student experience activities. “In all those cases, I didn’t purposely seek it [administration] out,” she says.

Four years ago, Georgia’s Board of Higher Education decided to consolidate the state’s multiple campuses for cost savings, enrollment and other efficiencies. Gajdosik-Nivens, who originally held her administrative positions at Armstrong State GA, a campus of 7,000 students, suddenly found herself with the same title but at the newly formed Georgia Southern with an enrollment of 25,000 students.

“Becoming a dean during the consolidation was a tumultuous time,” she contends. “A lot of things have to be negotiated across the two campuses; it’s a huge leadership challenge.”

GSU expects it will financially support its students who participate in the programming at the GIRL Center. “We want to make it ‘cool,’” says Gajdosik-Nivens. 📖

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simplicity of the answer opened like a flower. We have to forgive ourselves for failing to meet deadlines, for being too exhausted to work some days and for the couch-time. If we don’t have compassion for ourselves in what might be some of the toughest times we’ve encountered (and never doubt it—these times are tough), then we are harming ourselves more than we might realize. Accord-

ing to these scientists, depression is right around the corner if it isn’t already here.

If you don’t have someone you can talk to about self-compassion, then you need someone right now. That person can be a therapist or a good friend. You need to put safeties in place right now. Because in Pandemic-Plus, we will fail. We will Pandemic Procrastinate. Our brains will be fuzzy, and our bodies exhausted. In Pandemic-Plus, self-compassion and forgiveness are paramount. But (obviously, given my recent couch status), we can’t do it alone. Create accountability with someone you care about and who cares about you or a cheerleading chat group: anything to remind yourself that you are good, worthy and loved. 📖

Women on the Move, *continued from page 10*

inclusion to associate vice provost of academic affairs at Xavier University LA.

- **Dr. Karen K. Petersen** moves from dean of the College of Liberal Arts and professor of political science at Middle Tennessee State University to dean of the Kendall College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Tulsa OK.

- **Mary Rob Plunkett** moves from associate athletic director for business and senior woman administrator to director of athletics at the University of North Georgia.

- **Dr. Madeline Pumariega** moves from executive VP and provost at Tallahassee Community College FL to president of Miami Dade College FL.

- **Dr. Jackie Rees Ulmer** moves from associate dean for professional masters programs in Iowa State University’s Ivy College of Business to dean of the College of Business at Ohio University.

- **Nicoli Richardson, JD,** moves from senior investigator in the former Office of Equity and Diversity to deputy equity, equality opportunity and Title IX coordinator in the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity and Title IX at the University of Southern California.

- **Stephanie A. Roth, JD,** moves from interim to associate vice chancellor for equal access at Vanderbilt University TN.

- **Dr. Angela Salas** moves from provost and VP for academic affairs at Framingham State University MA to VP for academic affairs at Edgewood College WI.

- **Dr. Margaret Shadduck** moves from associate dean and faculty and unit director of New College at the University of North Texas to VP for regional campuses and dean of the College of Applied and Technical Studies at Kent State University OH.

- **Dr. Kendra Sharp** moves from professor in the College of Engineering and associate vice provost for faculty development at Oregon State University to head of the Office of International Science and Engineering at the National Science Foundation.

- **Dr. Ashley M. Stokes** moves from associate VP for engagement and extension and deputy director of exten-