

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Procrastination Equation**  
Expectancy x Value / Impulsiveness  
x Delay = Motivation!

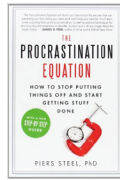
**The Success Spiral**  
Dominoes + island hopping.

**Mental Contrasting**  
> Creative visualization.

**+1 Month of Productivity**  
Reduce distractions!

**Lack of Sleep**  
It's a top driver for procrastination.

**Goal Setting**  
= Motivational super fuel.



# The Procrastination Equation

How to Stop Putting Things Off and Start Getting Stuff Done

BY PIERS STEEL, PH.D. · HARPER PERENNIAL © 2012 · 352 PAGES

“This book is about every promise you made to yourself but broke. It is about every goal you set but let slide, never finding the motivation. It is about diets postponed, late-night scrambles to finish projects, and disappointed looks from the people who depend on you—or from the one you see in the mirror. It is about being the slacker in your family and the straggler in your circle of friends. It is about that menacing cloud of uncompleted chores, from the late bill payments to the clutter that fills your home. It is about that doctor’s appointment you have been putting off and the finances still in disarray. It is about dawdling, delay, opportunity lost, and more. Much more. This book is also about the other side, the moments of action when procrastination gives way to crystal clarity and attention, work is devoured without hesitation, and giving up never even occurs to you. It is about personal transformation, about unencumbered desire free of internal competition, and the guiltless leisure you can enjoy when your daily tasks are done. This book is about potential, wasted and fulfilled; about dreams that fade into obscurity and dreams we can make come true. Best of all, this book is about shifting the rest of your life away from putting it off to getting it done.”

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D. from *The Procrastination Equation*

[Piers Steel](#), Ph.D. is one of the world’s leading researchers on the science of motivation and, specifically, procrastination.

He’s also a smart and funny writer. This is a great book packed with research pointing to the evolutionary and biological roots of our tendency to procrastinate. (Did you know other animals—even pigeons!—procrastinate?)

And, of course, it’s also packed with Big Ideas on what to do about our procrastination. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump straight in. We’ll start with the Procrastination Equation!

## THE PROCRASTINATION EQUATION

**“EXPECTANCY x VALUE /  
IMPULSIVENESS x DELAY**

And there it is: the Procrastination Equation—inspired by the common elements that determine when we procrastinate, and crafted together from the most deeply researched elements of social sciences’ strongest motivation theories. The Procrastination Equation accounts for every major finding for procrastination. As the deadline for any task gets pushed further into the future, Delay increases and our motivation to tackle the tasks decreases. Impulsiveness multiplies the effects of Delay, and so impulsive people feel the effects of time far less acutely, at least at first.

*“Procrastinators who understand the processes behind their inaction can master them and become less stressed about their deadlines and more able to meet them.”*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

*"Since its first appearance in the English language in the sixteenth century, procrastination has identified not just any delay but an irrational one—that is, when we voluntarily put off tasks despite believing ourselves to be worse off for doing so. When we procrastinate, we know we are acting against our own best interests."*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

Consequences have to be on their doorstep before they start paying attention to them—unless they are particularly large. And what makes consequences large? Expectancy and Value. The bigger the payoff and the greater the likelihood of receiving it, the sooner it will capture your attention."

The Procrastination Equation.

Let's unpack it a bit.

$$\text{EXPECTANCY} \times \text{VALUE} / \text{IMPULSIVENESS} \times \text{DELAY} = \text{MOTIVATION}$$

It all starts with Expectancy.

Do you EXPECT a great outcome? Are you confident in your ability to create whatever it is you aspire to create? If Expectancy is high, you're much less likely to procrastinate than if it's low.

Next up: Value.

Do you VALUE whatever it is you are working on? If it has a great deal of meaning for you, that's great—you'll be much more motivated than if it has little meaning, in which case you're more likely to be bored and procrastinate.

That's our numerator. If we want high levels of motivation, we need to make sure we Expect to achieve things we're excited about (aka we Value).

If our numerator is low, we're in trouble before we even get to the denominator. If it's high, we still need to pay attention to the denominator which is going to cut our motivation down if we're not aware!

Now we're ready for the #1 factor connected to procrastination: IMPULSIVENESS!

As Piers tells us, without impulsiveness, there would be no such thing as chronic procrastination. Impulsiveness, in short, is our tendency to want IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION but only all the time. Not always helpful for pursuing long-term important projects.

Then we have DELAY. Essentially, this measures how far into the future our project needs to be completed. The longer the Delay, the greater the likelihood of procrastination and, of course, the shorter the Delay, the less likely. Say hello to college cramming the night before an exam!

That's the Procrastination Equation.

If we want high levels of motivation, we need to increase our Expectancy + Value and decrease our Impulsiveness + Delay.

Of course, helping us do that is what the book is all about. Let's take a quick look at some of my favorite, practical Big Ideas!

## THE SUCCESS SPIRAL

"This is an example of a success spiral: if we set ourselves an ongoing series of challenging but ultimately achievable goals, we maximize our motivation and make the achievement meaningful, reflecting our capabilities. Each hard-won victory gives a new sense of self and a desire to strive for more. It is similar to the way Polynesian explorers colonized the South Pacific. From their home port they saw in the distance signs of a new island—a new goal—reachable if they made the proper provisions. Setting sail, they eventually made land, only to see another distant island from their new vantage point. Every step forward is enabled by the step just taken."

The Success Spiral.

This is from the chapter on Expectancy. Remember, if you don't have confidence you will achieve the outcome you're working on, how in the world do you think you'll be motivated?

*" Never before in our history  
have there been so many  
temptations, as succulently  
devised, as readily available,  
and as adeptly marketed."*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

Hint: You won't be. You'll procrastinate.

We need to build our Expectancy muscles. And *Success Spirals* are a GREAT way to do that.

We've touched on this in different ways throughout these Notes. I LOVE the vision of Polynesian explorers hopping from island to island. So cool. Success to success to success.

Another one of my favorite metaphors: Dominoes.

I'm writing this in August 2015. In December 2014 I created the Note on [Steve Chandler's](#) great book [Wealth Warrior](#) in which I talked about our strategy as we re-launched my Optimal Living membership program. At the time, we had 0 members and were weeks away from launching.

Leaning on the mojo of [this awesome video on the physics of dominoes](#), I described our strategy to first focus on getting ONE member. There was a lot of work to do just to set everything up to accept our first payment and welcome our first member. Getting to that first member was ALL we cared about. (Think: Knocking over the first domino/getting to the island we could see.)

We knew that if we could get 1 member, we could get 10. If we could get 10, we could get 100. If we could get 100, we could get 1,000. And, if we could get 1,000, we could get 10,000.

Each micro goal created it's own success spiral and, sure enough, we steadily went from 1 to 10 to 100 to 1,000. We're approaching 5,000 as I type this and my confidence in our ability to get to 10,000 is now absolute. My EXPECTANCY is really really high. (Post 10,000 we get to have fun seeing how we get to 100,000. :)

Success spirals. Island hopping. Dominoes.

How can you break your big goal down into smaller micro goals and build your confidence/expectancy muscles?

Seriously. How can you?

(Let's do that!!)

P.S. [Gary Keller](#) talks about Dominoes in his GREAT book [The ONE Thing](#). Check out those Notes as well and remember: *"The key is over time. Success is built sequentially. It's one thing at a time."*

## MENTAL CONTRASTING > CREATIVE VISUALIZATION

*" Break down the tasks that  
daunt you into smaller and  
smaller pieces. Keep formal  
track of your progress.  
Count your successes."*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

**"What happens if you forgo the second step and just focus on the positive fantasies alone? Creative visualization advocates just that. It involves creating vivid and compelling pictures of your heart's desire, with the aim of drawing this vision toward you. But Oettingen, who has researched this for twenty years, finds that such fantasies tend to have the opposite effect than advertised; they sap motivational energy. The only wealth created by creative visualization is a rich fantasy life. Whether the task is preparing for exams, getting a job, recovering from surgery, smoking less, dating an attractive stranger, or improving personal relationships, she found that the worst-performing group used positive fantasies alone. You are better off not using the technique at all."**

Creative visualization vs. mental contrasting.

The research is UNEQUIVOCAL.

Creative visualization—in which we merely imagine our ideal outcome—is NOT EFFECTIVE. Period.

We need to add another component. We need to mentally contrast our ideal scene with our current reality. We need to get real about the gap between them and be willing to look at the inevitable obstacles we will face in pursuit of making that ideal a reality.

*"The history of procrastination likely began around nine thousand years ago, sprouting along with the invention of agriculture. Planting crops in the spring to reap them in the fall was our first artificial deadline; it was a task that civilization and survival required but not one we had evolved to perform."*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

We do THAT and magic happens.

It's like some motivational switch is flipped and we get to work. Scientists describe this as creating a "necessity to act." <— We want that!

[Heidi Grant Halvorson](#), one of the world's leading researchers focused on the science of effective goal setting, refers to the same research by Oettingen in her great book [Succeed](#) (see Notes). She tells us: "What about "visualizing success"? I won't name names, but it seems like there are an awful lot of self-help books out there telling people that if they just picture what they want in their minds, it will somehow happen. That would be great if it were true, but scientifically speaking, there really isn't much evidence for it. On the other hand, visualization can be very helpful, if you imagine the steps you will take in order to succeed, rather than the success itself. Mentally simulating the process of achieving the goal, rather than the hoped-for outcome, not only results in a more optimistic outlook, but in greater planning and preparation. Picture yourself doing what it takes to succeed, and you will soon find yourself believing that you can. The best part is, you'll be absolutely right."

Plus: "Don't visualize success. Instead, visualize the steps you will take in order to succeed. Just picturing yourself crossing the finish line doesn't actually help you get there— but visualizing how you run the race (the strategies you will use, the choices you will make, the obstacles you will face) not only will give you greater confidence, but also leave you better prepared for the task ahead. And that is definitely realistic optimism."

Here's to mental contrasting!

See your ideal outcome. See your current reality. Get fired up about the possibilities and get real about the effort it will take to get there. Know you can achieve it. Know it'll be challenging and that you're willing to put in the required work. THAT's true confidence.

And then, of course, get to work! :)

## WANT TO ADD A MONTH OF PRODUCTIVITY TO YOUR YEAR?

"Here is a trick that will give you an extra month of efficiency each year. It's easy to implement, immediately effective, and doesn't cost a cent. First, go to your e-mail program. Second, disable all the audio alerts and mailbox pop-ups... That's it, there is no third step. Banishing e-mail notifications will make you about 10 percent more efficient and over a year that translates into one more month of productivity. The best work happens when you engage deeply on a single task. Every time you stop your flow, you have to once again decide to work and then it takes time to become fully re-engaged. Unfortunately, we are conditioned to answer e-mail instantly, responding to the tell-tale 'ding' like Pavlov's dogs. Unless you have a pressing reason, check your e-mail at your convenience, during natural breaks in your productivity."

This is big.

It's from the chapter on reducing our Impulsiveness. (<— THE #1 productivity poison.)

Here's the key: WE NEED TO REDUCE DISTRACTIONS. (<— Yes, all caps.)

We need to Focus.

You may *think* your multi-tasking is awesome but it's not.

Every.single.time you pull your attention away from the task at hand and do something else (no matter how trivial/"quickly"), you're shredding your attention, losing momentum and forcing yourself to get your momentum back.

You do that dozens (or hundreds!) of times a day responding to every email, text, push notifications, etc. and you're wasting a TON (!!!) of time.

*"Very few succeed in major life reforms the first try; most of us need multiple attempts."*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

*"Without impulsiveness, there wouldn't be such a thing as chronic procrastination."*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

Piers estimates that simply banishing your email notifications will increase your productivity 10%. 10% may not sound like a lot but add that up over the course of the year and you just got a WHOLE MONTH of productivity back.

\* rubs eyes \*

Nuts, right?

Little things matter.

Which is one of the reasons why I'm excited about all the Big Ideas in the Notes + Micro Classes. Any ONE Idea can literally change your life. The aggregate effect of diligently, patiently, persistently playing with + testing Ideas that inspire us? Mind-bogglingly awesome.

P.S. One of the best ways to free ourselves of distractions and get GREAT work done? Time Blocking.

Here's how [Gary Keller](#) puts it in The ONE Thing: *"Most people think there's never enough time to be successful, but there is when you block it. Time blocking is a very results-oriented way of viewing and using time. It's a way of making sure that what has to be done gets done. Alexander Graham Bell said, 'Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand. The sun's rays do not burn until brought to a focus.' Time blocking harnesses your energy and centers it on your most important work. It's productivity's greatest power tool."*

Very important question: When's YOUR next time block?!

Here's to putting productivity's greatest power tool to work!

## GET PLENTY OF SLEEP!

"Get plenty of sleep. Being too tired is the number one reason people cite for putting things off. If you are not getting eight hours of sleep a night, you are harming your performance during the day. Lack of sleep significantly lowers all forms of cognitive performance, making everything you do more difficult. Here's an idea: instead of setting your alarm clock to get yourself up, set it to cue you to go to sleep. When you hear that buzz, start your wind-down routine."

SLEEP!!!!!!!!!!

Know this: Being too tired is the #1 reason people cite for putting things off.

I love how clear Piers is with this.

→ *"If you are not getting eight hours of sleep a night, you are harming your performance during the day."*

It's really simple.

Are YOU getting 8 hours of sleep a night?

If yes, #highfive!

If not, now a good time to start prioritizing that?! For what time would it be wise for you to set your go-to-bed alarm? :)

P.S. Here's more on the [value of Sleep](#).

## GOAL SETTING = MOTIVATION SUPER FUEL

"Goal setting—proper goal setting—is the *smartest* thing you can do to battle procrastination. Though every other technique discussed so far has its place, goal setting alone may be all you need. Along with making your goals challenging and meaningful, follow these remaining steps. Regardless of what other books say, this is what's proven to maximize your motivation.

*"Intentions can even be used to implement other self-regulatory techniques, especially when expressed in an 'If . . . then' format."*

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

"Don't discount small gains, as over the course of a year, a 10-percent improvement in efficiency translates into more than an extra month of getting stuff done."

~ Piers Steel, Ph.D.

- Frame your goals in specific terms so that you know precisely when you have to achieve them. What exactly do you have to do? And when do you have to do it by? ...
- Break down long-term goals into a series of short-term objectives. For particularly daunting tasks, begin with a mini-goal to break the motivational surface tension. For example, a goal of tackling just the first few pages of any required reading can often be enough to get you to finish the entire text.
- Organize your goals into routines that occur regularly at the same time and place. Predictability is your pal, so open your schedule and pencil in recurring tasks. Better yet, use an indelible pen."

Want to increase your motivation and reduce your procrastination? SET GOALS.

What are *yours*?

Let's be specific. What, *precisely*, do you want to achieve?

Let's break them down into short-term objectives. What are your dominoes? How will you island hop as you build success spirals?!

And, what routines are you going to create? Write them in your calendar in INDELIBLE ink—aka, permanent. :)

Well, there you go. That's a *super* quick look at how to solve the Procrastination Equation.

Here's to optimizing and actualizing as we increase Expectancy + Value while we decrease Impulsiveness + Delay so we can watch our motivation soar!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Chief Philosopher*

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## About the Author of "The Procrastination Equation"

PIERS STEEL, PH.D.



Piers Steel likes to think he is among the world's foremost researchers and speakers on the science of motivation and procrastination. Well, he is a Distinguished Research Chair at the University of Calgary, where he teaches human resources and organizational dynamics at the Haskayne School of Business. His research has appeared in several outlets around the world, ranging from *Psychology Today* and *New Scientist* to *Good Housekeeping* and *The New Yorker*. Connect: [procrastinus.com](http://procrastinus.com).

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).