



I forgive myself, now I can study: How self-forgiveness for procrastinating can reduce future procrastination

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, we examined the association between forgiving the self for a specific instance of procrastination and procrastination on that same task in the future. A sample of 119 first-year University students (49 male, 70 female) completed measures of procrastination and self-forgiveness immediately before each of two midterm examinations in their introductory psychology course. Results revealed that among students who reported high levels of self-forgiveness for procrastinating on studying for the first examination, procrastination on preparing for the subsequent examination was reduced. This relationship was mediated by negative affect, such that increased self-forgiveness reduced procrastination by decreasing negative affect. Results are discussed in relation to the impact of procrastination on self-directed negative affect.

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1. Introduction

Procrastination can be broadly defined as the voluntary, need-less delay of an intended course of action past the time most likely to produce the desired performance or successful completion (Lay, 1986; Steel, 2007). University students are perhaps the population most well known for engaging in this type of procrastinatory behavior. It is not uncommon to hear students speak of last-minute, “all-nighters” prior to an important exam or essay deadline. Studies estimate that nearly all students procrastinate at some point, and more than 50% of students procrastinate almost all the time (e.g., Hill, Hill, Chabot, & Barrall, 1978). Such behavior is often thought of as just another part of the university experience, but there are important reasons why procrastination should be considered harmful. For example, research has shown that procrastination can result in poor academic performance (e.g., Steel, 2007), experiencing negative emotions such as shame and guilt about oneself (Fee & Tangney, 2000), depression (e.g., Strongman & Burt, 2000), and negative health behaviors, such as delaying seeking care for health problems (e.g., Sirois, Melia-Gordon, & Pychyl, 2003).

Although there have been a number of different potential causal factors identified in relation to procrastination such as temporal discounting (Pychyl, Lee, Thibodeau, & Blunt, 2000; Steel & Konig, 2006), task aversiveness (e.g., Blunt & Pychyl, 2000; Lay, 1992), fear of failure (e.g., Schouwenburg, 1992), self-handicapping (e.g., Ferrari, 1991; Lay, Knish, & Zanatta, 1992) or personality (e.g., Lay, 1997; Schouwenburg & Lay, 1995; Watson, 2001), each perspective

on procrastination clearly defines it as a self-defeating behavior and a failure of self-regulation. Underscoring this point is how Baumeister and his colleagues (e.g., Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Gailliot, Mead, & Baumeister, 2008) have identified procrastination as one instance of a class of self-defeating behaviors (e.g., over-eating, over-spending, problem gambling, sexual promiscuity) that result from self-regulation failure. According to Steel (2007), results from a meta-analysis suggest procrastination might be the quintessential self-regulatory failure.

Two things are particularly important in terms of procrastination as self-regulatory failure. First, across a variety of outcome measures including academic performance (e.g., Steel, 2007), psychological and physiological well-being (see Sirois et al., 2003; Tice & Baumeister, 1997) and even financial security (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2006), there is evidence that procrastination is self-harming. It is clear that a failure to self-regulate to achieve one's goals, as is the case with procrastination, is a transgression against the self, as this self-defeating behavior affects basic indicators of well-being such as health and wealth. Second, in contrast to the self-regulatory failures that lead to such things as substance abuse or over-eating (i.e., approach behaviors), procrastination involves trying to escape or at least delay engaging in a particular action (i.e., an avoidance behavior). People who procrastinate harm themselves by irrationally avoiding an intended task. Consequently, overcoming procrastination requires replacing this avoidance motivation with an approach motivation.

Given that procrastination can be considered a transgression that is harmful to the self, forgiving oneself for procrastinating is likely to be an essential step in effecting motivational change.

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Self-forgiveness can be conceptualized as a series of changes in motivation, in which the motivations to avoid stimuli connected with the transgression and engage in self-punishment are decreased, while the motivation to act benevolently towards oneself increases (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Self-forgiveness thus essentially involves replacing an avoidance motivation with an approach motivation. In the context of our study of students' academic procrastination on examination preparation, we argue that self-forgiveness for procrastination might decrease the negative affect, usually guilt, that is felt for procrastinating on examination preparation. With this reduction in negative affect, it is more likely that students would reduce procrastination on subsequent examination preparation, demonstrating an approach motivation replacing an avoidance motivation. In fact, self-forgiveness for procrastinating may be one of the few appropriate, and necessary, coping strategies available to the individual both in terms of efforts to deal with the negative moods as well as potentially repairing the performance in the future.

1.1. Self-forgiveness

Self-forgiveness has only recently begun to be studied systematically, and there is still a paucity of empirical research on the tendency to self-forgive. Hall and Fincham (2005) argue that there are three essential steps to self-forgiveness. First, one must acknowledge the commission of a transgression against the self and accept responsibility for that transgression. One must then experience feelings of guilt and regret. Finally, one must overcome these feelings (i.e., self-forgiveness), and in doing so, experience a motivational change away from self-punishment towards self-acceptance. For example, Wohl, DeShea, and Wahkinney (2008), showed that for people who experienced the unwanted end to a romantic relationship, increases in self-blame predicted increases in depressive affect. This effect was mediated by self-forgiveness. As self-forgiveness is a positive self-referent attitudinal shift, self-forgiveness undermined negative feelings toward the self.

We argue that self-forgiveness for procrastinating may help people overcome the negative effects of procrastination and encourage a change in behavior. First, by reducing the emotional distress that results from procrastination through self-forgiveness, the individual becomes less likely to avoid the stimulus associated with the affect in the first place (i.e., the task that was delayed). Second, because self-forgiveness is typically accompanied by a vow to change one's behavior in the future (Hall & Fincham, 2005; Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005; Wohl et al., 2008), this encourages the individual to engage in approach behaviors rather than behaviors motivated by avoidance. Thus self-forgiving for procrastinating may make it less likely that the individual will be motivated to avoid unpleasant tasks and more likely that he or she will approach success by procrastinating less in the future.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between self-forgiveness and procrastination in a sample of first-year university students. Participants were measured on procrastination and self-forgiveness immediately before both their first and second midterm examinations in their psychology course. Participants were also measured on negative as well as positive affect concerning the outcome of the first examination during an online session held between examinations. We predicted that procrastination prior to the first midterm would interact with self-forgiveness to reduce such behavior prior to the second midterm. We also examined whether self-forgiveness, moderated by first midterm procrastination, would decrease negative affect and increase positive affect related to how they feel about their first midterm. We hypothesized high procrastinators who self-forgave would report the least amount of negative affect. No explicit hypothesis, however, was made about the interactive effect of pro-

crastination and self-forgiveness on positive affect. One possibility is that because self-forgiveness is contingent upon recognition that *harm* has been done to the self, whether or not procrastination has occurred, positive affect should not factor into the equation. It is also possible, however, that since self-forgiveness fosters a positive self-referent attitudinal shift, positive affect about the first midterm exam might be increased. Finally, we investigated whether the relationship between self-forgiveness and procrastination on the second midterm was mediated by affect experienced in relation to the first midterm. We hypothesized that self-forgiveness would interact with procrastination prior to the first midterm to predict lower levels of negative affect, and this in turn would predict lower levels of procrastination for the second midterm. Thus, a mediated-moderation model was tested.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from a single section of an introductory psychology course at Carleton University. A total of 312 students completed the questionnaire just prior to the first midterm. Of this total, 134 students completed the subsequent two sessions (76 female, 58 male) and ranged in age from 16 to 56 years ($M = 20.43$, $SD = 5.06$). Participants received 1% in grade-raising credit towards their introductory psychology course for completing all three sessions.

2.2. Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, information about the study was given to students in class. Immediately before the first midterm, a questionnaire was distributed to the students that contained two short measures: procrastination, and self-forgiveness for procrastinating. Each item in the questionnaire was rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale. Midway between their first and second midterm (and after students received their first midterm grade), participants were asked to indicate whether they believed their procrastination had influenced performance on the first exam. They also completed scales that assessed both positive and negative affect concerning their performance on the first exam. Lastly, just prior to their second midterm, participants were asked the extent to which they procrastinated with regard to their studying for the second midterm. After this final session, participants were fully debriefed.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Procrastination

Three-items measured procrastination prior to the first ($\alpha = .84$) and second ($\alpha = .84$) midterm. These items were: "I put off studying until the last minute," "I delayed preparing for the exam by doing other, less important things instead," and "I began studying much later than I intended to" anchored at one (*strongly disagree*) and seven (*strongly agree*). These items were drawn from existing measures of procrastination to maintain as much content and construct validity as possible, particularly with regards to the irrationality ("less important things instead") and violation of intention ("much late than I intended to") that are central to the definition of procrastination (e.g., Lay, 1986; Steel, 2007).

2.3.2. Self-forgiveness

Self-forgiveness for procrastinating was measured with three items ($\alpha = .86$) just prior to taking the first midterm. These items were: "I dislike myself for procrastinating," "I criticize myself be-

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