‘Procrastination is universal but manageable’ TED talk

Welcome everyone to my TED talk I finally got around to writing! I’m going to be talking about a topic that has a major impact on all areas of our lives that EVERYONE experiences. But don’t look too glum because \*spoiler alert\* it can be overcome!

Say, hypothetically, [laugh] I had a company review I had to present on Thursday.Today is Saturday and I’m on a long weekend so I’ve got plenty of time to write a piece every day! This graph indicates my planned time management where the red bars show my allotted work time and the yellow bars represent activities. You can see it looks quite neatly spread out… yeah and then after a few days… I realise it’s started to become more like this. And I’m sure you’re all sitting there thinking this made me do a poor job. In fact, it was one of my best yet! [pause to receive applause] Yeah nah. I just needed that moment of glory.

Now I’m sure you’ve all experienced similar situations: some big assignment you smash out the night before the deadline, never getting around to doing that washing load today because you’re too busy, writing up your CV on the way to your job interview. You know what I mean. As the famous quote says, “Procrastination is the thief of opportunity”. So what really is procrastination all about? I mean it’s a universal issue so surely it’s important to look into it. Well, procrastination actually stems from our body’s response to perceived threats, turning tasks like studying into mountains of stress. That part of us that knows what we should be doing, let's call it the wise old owl, is pushed aside by the fun-loving turkey who wants to avoid the effort of facing that unpleasant feeling. He would rather be binging on YouTube, texting friends, playing the piano, doing dishes – anything – to keep from the task even though turkey knows there may be negative consequences. The only thing that frightens turkey away is the 11th hour monster, leaving owl free to take over and get the task done. I mean it’s no wonder some people are called bird brained.

Now I need to mention that since this is a universal issue you should not beat yourself up over procrastinating. I know some people can feel quite guilty over what they’ve done and the regret lowers their self-esteem. You are not worthless and totally undisciplined! Let owl be that quiet voice at the end of the day saying, “I will try again tomorrow.” I mean sometimes procrastination actually occurs because someone cares TOO MUCH about their task and they fear their work won’t live up to high standards. So understand that while it is an issue you need to work on breaking, managing procrastination is a work in progress and carefree turkey will still often take over.

Now I’m finally at the part you’ve probably been waiting for the whole time – how do I manage procrastination? Now I have some ideas for you which I hope are helpful.

Step 1: Embrace the pain and get started! It is the hardest bit of the process I promise but when you can conquer this you will achieve so much. Kathrine Switzer has a comment on this, “There is an expression amongst even the most advanced runners that getting your shoes on is the hardest part of any workout.” This step can apply to any activity – you need to decide to focus.

Step 2: Now you may be thinking ‘well that sounds nice but the thought of lots of hard work is so off-putting.’ I get it. Break your task into smaller manageable pieces with clear beginnings and ends. This will help your motivation because you can focus on your progress, not the final product. Don’t look at the whole staircase, just take it step by step.

Step 3: Give yourself a certain length of time you are going to work so that having an endpoint gives you something to work toward. Maybe 20 minutes? Then take a break and try to do that again. Repeating this process will actually achieve a great amount of work since the task will seem easier… and less stress keeps the turkey away.

Step 4: If you have a variety of tasks that need to be achieved an important strategy is to get the hardest task done first! Don’t do all the easy things then run out of motivation to get the big one done. I know this is sometimes influenced by the order of when tasks are due but as a principle this helps the work ahead seem more manageable.

Step 5: Remove nearby distractions. Distractions are probably the biggest thing keeping you from achieving your goals because it means you have to keep overcoming the first step of starting and this is exhausting. So turn your mobile to silent, close distracting tabs and move away from your talkative friends to help you remain focused.

Now I sincerely believe that all of you here CAN break procrastination, if not every time, at least often and particularly when it’s important! When you achieve this feel free to reward yourselffor the discipline and self-control needed like by having a coffee with friends. This will also help train your brain to develop these healthy habits… but don’t use this as an excuse to miss your next task. [laugh] I want to conclude this talk by saying a famous quote I feel to be quite relevant to this universal issue of managing procrastination:

“The stars will never align, and the traffic lights of life will never all be green at the same time. The universe doesn’t conspire against you, but it doesn’t go out of its way to line up the pins either. Conditions are never perfect. ‘Someday’ is a disease that will take your dreams to the grave with you”. Today is your opportunity to build the tomorrow you want!

*Word count: 995 words*