



HOW TO STOP PROCRASTINATING

Sam Horn

**“My parents always told me I wouldn’t amount to anything because I procrastinated so much. I told them, ‘Just you wait.’”
– Judy Tenuta**

Are you a charter member of the Procrastinator’s Club? Their motto is *“We’re behind you all the way.”*

I’m a woman on a mission to help people put procrastination behind them.

Why is this so important? Because procrastination is a prescription for regrets.

When we get to the end of our life, we won’t regret the things we *did*, we’ll regret the things we *didn’t do*.

That’s the purpose of this manifesto: to share best-practices on how to stop procrastinating on the little things, the big things, and the important things so we can prevent regrets. Here we go.

How to Stop Procrastinating on the Little Things

“It’s amazing how long it takes to complete something we’re not working on.” —R.D. Clyde

What are you waiting to do? What are some tasks you keep putting off?

Whether it’s your taxes, a tech review or taking out the trash, the next time you’re about to procrastinate on a dreaded or inconvenient chore, ask yourself these five questions.

- 1. Do I HAVE to do this?**
- 2. Do I have to do this?**
- 3. Do I WANT THIS DONE so I don’t have to worry or feel guilty about it anymore?**
- 4. HOW LONG will this actually take?**
- 5. Will this be any EASIER LATER?**

These questions may sound simplistic, but they have the power to reverse a default of *automatically* and *habitually* putting things off with the promise to do them... later.

Here’s a favorite example of how these questions can motivate us to act in the moment.

A woman came up to me in the halls the day after a conference keynote. She said, “Thanks for those five ‘To procrastinate or not to procrastinate’ questions. I already put them to use!”

“How so?”

“I was driving home, saw a gas station up ahead and thought, ‘I should really get some gas.’

Then I thought, ‘I’ll get it tomorrow’ and was about to drive by when I remembered:

‘Do I HAVE to get gas? Yes, the fuel gauge is almost on empty.

Do I have to get gas? Yes, I’m the only one who drives this car. No one will do it for me.

Do I want to fill up so I don’t have to worry about running out on the freeway tomorrow morning during rush hour? YES.

It only takes 5 minutes to get gas. Why am I making such a big deal about this?

It won’t be easier later. I’m in front of a gas station RIGHT NOW.’

So, I drove in and got some gas. And I’m glad I did instead of having that hang over my head.

It didn’t stop there. When I got home I started fixing dinner and went to get something out of the refrigerator. I saw some out-of-date yogurt on a shelf and thought, “I should really throw that away,” and then promptly shut the door and started walking away.

I thought, ‘Wait a minute. I just did it again. How long does it take to throw away yogurt? Five seconds! So, I went back, got the yogurt out and threw it away. Those five questions WORK.”

Yes, they do, Alice, yes they do.

Next time, you're about to automatically put off a task, talk yourself through these questions. They might be just the incentive you need to realize that task isn't going away, an elf isn't going to show up and magically take care of it for you, it won't take as long or be as onerous as you're making it out to be, and you'll be glad it's over and no longer weighing on your mind.

That's what happened with a manager named Cliff. He told me, "I was putting off a difficult conversation with an employee who was not performing up to par. She's got a reputation for being 'prickly' so I wasn't looking forward to sitting down with her and kept coming up with reasons for doing it 'next week.'

When I talked myself through those questions, I realized that this situation wasn't going to get better by itself, that it was my job as her supervisor to hold her accountable, and that her co-workers were resenting her—and starting to resent me—because I hadn't addressed this. It wasn't comfortable, but I know it was the right thing to do and I'm glad I stepped up and did it."

These questions may sound simplistic, but they have the power to reverse a default of automatically and habitually putting things off with the promise to do them ... later.

How about you? Are you avoiding a difficult conversation? With whom? Why? Ask yourself these 5 questions:

1. Do I have to have this conversation?

Chances are, yes. When employees (or children) aren't held accountable for inappropriate behavior, they start feeling entitled. They think, "Well, you're not saying anything about this, so it must be okay." They see your silence as tacit approval.

2. Do I have to have this conversation?

If you are this person's supervisor (or parent) the answer is yes. It's not their co-workers' (or siblings') responsibility to correct this situation, it's yours.

3. Do I want this taken care of so it's not hanging over my head?

How long have you been aware of, and bothered by, this person's behavior? Imagine how relieved you will be to have this over so it's no longer stressing you (and others).

4. How long will it actually take?

This is the embarrassing part. Often, the conversation itself will probably only take 5-20 minutes, yet you may have spent hours—weeks or months—thinking about it. Avoiding what needs to be done is a misuse, a waste, of time or energy.

5. Will this be any easier later?

Actually, this will get worse the longer you wait. This person will probably try to make this your fault and say something like, "Well, if it was bothering you so much, why didn't you speak up before?"

That's the beauty of these five "To procrastinate or not to procrastinate" questions. They have the power to bring us face to face with the consequences of procrastinating. They make it perfectly clear that it's to our advantage to act NOW instead of later.

How to Stop Procrastinating on the Big Things

"In any given moment, we have a choice is to step forward into growth or step back into safety."
—Abraham Maslow

Want to know another reason we procrastinate?

For many of us, *if we don't know, we don't go.*

The problem with that is, by definition, whenever we try something new, it's impossible to know what we're doing. It's our *first time*. If we think "I have to know to go" ... we never go.

That's why a key to putting procrastination behind us is to change this default belief.

That's where GTS comes in. What's GTS? Let me explain.

A year after my son Andrew graduated from VA Tech with a business degree, we were having dinner.

Andrew had “lucked out” and found a job as an executive recruiter. He was the envy of his college buddies because he was working in a classy downtown building, making good money and working for a respected industry icon who was arranging for him to do neat things like work at events with President Obama and Tony Bennett. Not the normal career trajectory.

Yet, as I looked into Andrew’s eyes that night over dinner, there was no spark. In fact, he used a word I’d never heard him use before. *Exhausted*.

I asked, “So, are you going to Blacksburg this weekend to see the basketball team play against Duke?”

“Nah. By the time I’d drive down there, I’d only have a few hours and then I’d have to turn around and come back. I just don’t have the energy. I’m exhausted.”

Exhausted?!? How could that be? How was it that this formerly energetic 20-something was burned out? I asked, “Andrew, what’s up?”

He said, “Mom, I want to quit. I know I should be grateful for this job, and I am, but sitting at a computer all day researching job openings and making cold calls is not what I was born to do.”

“What do you want to do?”

Andrew immediately became more animated. “I want to start a non-profit.”

I have to admit, what was on the tip of my tongue was, “Non-profit?! How will you pay bills? What about health insurance?”

Thank heaven a wiser voice prevailed. I thought to myself, “Isn’t this exactly what 20-some-things ought to be doing at this stage of their life? If he doesn’t go for what he wants now, he may never get a chance to do it later. Good for him for wanting to do meaningful work he’s proud of. I should be supporting him, not shutting him down.”

So I said, “Andrew, you’ve always been resourceful. If you apply yourself, I know you can pull this off.”

You may be thinking, “But how could Andrew pull this off? He’d never run a non-profit before.”

That’s true ... and that’s where GTS comes in. GTS stands for Google That Stuff. (As you can imagine, Millennials sometimes substitute another word for stuff.)

Andrew thanked his boss for giving him that job opportunity right out of college—and then promptly got online and Googled “*How can I start a non-profit?*”

For many of us, if we don’t know, we don’t go. The problem with that is, by definition, whenever we try something new, it’s impossible to know what we’re doing. It’s our first time.

Up came dozens of resources—all telling Andrew exactly what steps he needed to take to get the appropriate licenses, build a team, generate visibility and traction, and get funding.

In his online research, he also read a pivotal article that reported that many startups and small businesses fail in the first year due to *social isolation*. It suggested he surround himself with like-minded people so he could feed off their energy and input instead of trying to go it alone.

Over the next year, Andrew recruited a team of 20 (!) interns and found a collaborative work space at the Affinity Lab in Washington DC.

It was the ideal environment to get the support he needed to figure things out. While getting a cup of coffee, someone asked, “What are you working on today?”

Andrew said, “I’m applying for a grant.” She said, “Oh, I did that last year. You can borrow my proposal and use it as a template.”

Another time a guy at the next desk asked, “What’s on your plate today?”

Andrew said, “I’m trying to get a permit from the Parks and Recreation District to hold a water-skiing event next month at a local lake.”

He said, “Oh, you want to talk with Rob. He’s a great guy. Here’s his number.”

Voila. A month later Andrew and his DreamsForKids-DC team were hosting a water-skiing clinic for kids with disabilities. I was there that day, and will always remember standing next to a mom who had tears streaming down her face as she watched her son canoe for the first time. “He’s smiling,” she said. “I haven’t seen him smile in months.”

Dreams for Kids is now in its 10th year. It has sponsored dozens of adaptive athletic programs for kids with disabilities and gotten them off the sidelines and into the games of life. They have sponsored Extreme Recess clinics with the Washington Nationals, Capitals, Wizards, and United sports teams and made a positive difference for thousands of young people through their Dream Leader programs and annual Holiday for Hope programs at Howard University.

All because Andrew didn't quit before he started because he "didn't know" what he was doing.

If there's anything I've learned in the past few years traveling across the country and interviewing people for my book *Someday is Not a Day in the Week*, it's that "*People can't jump on your bandwagon if it's parked in the garage.*"

What is a goal you have for your career? What would put the light on in your eyes? Are you hesitating because you don't know what to do?

1. **Remember—you don't have to know to go.**
2. **GTS your dream job, a business you want to start, a skill you want to learn.** Up will come dozens of resources to help you on your way.

Go online right now. Phrase what you want to do as a question and put it into your favorite search engine. Whether you want to write for your industry magazine, present a white paper at a national conference or start a mentoring program at your organization ... you will discover online resources that will tell you how to take your first steps.

3. **Don't go it alone. Go it together.** Check out shared work spaces like We Work or Hera Hub or 1776. Attend a local association meeting of a profession you'd like to explore.

Thinking about becoming a coach? Check out ICF—it has chapters in every major city.

Want to write a book? Join a Facebook support group or call a local bookstore or library to see if they host meetings for aspiring authors.

How to Stop Procrastinating on the Important Things

“The #1 prerequisite for change? A sense of urgency.” —John Kotter

Sometimes we procrastinate because we’re afraid. We’re afraid to fail, afraid of the unknown, afraid because of perceived risk.

We want things to be different, wish they were different, but don’t have enough incentive, urgency or clarity to take necessary action to make them different. Here’s what I mean.

A forty-something woman names Beverly raised her hand in a SOMEDAY presentation in Waikiki and said, “I’ve been to conferences like this before. I go home all fired up, then life intervenes, and two weeks later everything is back to same old, same old. Any suggestions?”

I told her, “Have an S.E.E. to give yourself a sense of urgency and clarity.

“What’s an S.E.E.?”

“It’s a Significant Emotional Event. Unfortunately, most are dramatic or traumatic. We get fired, divorced, have a health challenge or lose a loved one. We realize the clock is ticking. We’re motivated to focus on what’s important and change things up now because we realize we may not get a second chance.

The way I see it, why not have an *imaginary* S.E.E. instead of an *actual* S.E.E. so we get the epiphany without the pain?”

“How can we do that?”

“When you’re about to put off something that’s important to you, just ask yourself, “If I only had a week to live, what would I do in this situation?”

“You’re asking us to imagine we’re going to croak in a week? Isn’t that a little morbid?”

If there’s anything I’ve learned in the past few years traveling across the country and interviewing people ... it’s that “People can’t jump on your bandwagon if it’s parked in the garage.”

I smiled, “Thinking about our mortality isn’t *morbid*; it’s *motivating*. Sometimes it’s just the incentive we need to stop taking opportunities for granted and to change our life—for good.”

“Okay, I’ll play along. If I only had a week to live, I would stop letting fear rule my life. I’d start being more adventurous and do things that scare me.”

“Like what?”

“Like going into the ocean. I saw the movie *JAWS* when I was a kid. Big mistake. Here I am in Hawaii and I haven’t even gone into the water.”

“Okay, let’s hack that fear. One way to hack a fear is to *reduce the perceived risk so the daunting is doable*. Do you know about the Natatorium here in Waikiki where Olympian Duke Kahanamoku used to swim? It’s only three feet deep so there’s no way you can get in over your head, and there’s only one small opening in the sea wall so the surf can’t get in *and neither can the sharks*.”

“Sounds promising.”

“Another important way to hack a fear is to put a date on the calendar where you’ll face that fear so you don’t wiggle out of your intentions. When are you leaving the islands?”

“We fly out in two days.”

“Then tomorrow is the day. Schedule a 6 a.m. wake-up call. Now, when that alarm goes off, you’ll probably be tempted to pull the covers up, roll over and go back to sleep. And that’s when you ask yourself the #1 question for motivating change, ‘*What will matter a year from now?*’ Will it matter that you got an extra hour of sleep? Or that you finally overcame a fear that’s been

keeping you from living full out, and that you gifted yourself with a one-of-a-kind experience you'll always be grateful for?"

"It's worth a try. But why 6 am?"

"Because sunrise is at 6:30 am and you want to be at water's edge, ready to step into the ocean the moment the sun rises over Diamond Head. It will be what Hawaiians call a 'chicken skin' experience. *Experiences are more meaningful when they're metaphors.* You're not just stepping into the ocean, you're stepping into a new way of life where you honor your mortality and make the most of your life, health, relationships, freedom and opportunities now, not someday."

I handed her my business card, "Please text me a picture and let me know how it goes, okay?"

By the way, that's another way to hack a fear. Promise to send a picture of you DOING it to someone who will share in celebrating that accomplishment.

The next day I received a smiling photo of Beverly with an "I DID IT!" with an exclamation point and smiley face emoji.

How about you? What is an important change you want to make?

Do you want to talk to your boss about a deserved promotion or pay raise? Do you want to go back to school to get a certification that will position you for a project lead?

Instead of vaguely promising yourself you'll do it someday, could you have a pretend S.E.E. to give yourself a sense of urgency and clarity so you're motivated to act on it today?

If fears are holding you back, ask yourself:

1. “What will matter a year from now?”

Will it matter that you played it safe and stayed in your comfort zone - or will you be glad you took responsibility for your career success by initiating on your own behalf?

2. “How can I hack this fear and reduce the risk so I make the daunting do-able?”

For that promotion, could you gather documented proof of the money you’ve saved or made with your initiatives so you’re not asking for a personal favor, you’re asking for financial acknowledgement of your tangible commitments to the company?

For that certification, could you call the sponsoring organization and ask for success stories and testimonials of people who vouch for their investment paying off?

3. “Exactly WHEN will I face this fear so I don’t wiggle out of my good intentions?”

Who will you promise to send a picture of you doing this to hold yourself accountable for your good intentions? Who will help you celebrate this experience and achievement?

Tina Fey says, “You can’t be that kid standing at the top of the waterslide, overthinking it. You have to go down the chute.”

Don’t be that kid standing at the top of the waterslide of your life and career never going in because you let fear win.

Do you want this year to be your best ever? Do you want results instead of regrets?

Don't wait, initiate.

GTS what you want to do. Then get your bandwagon out of the garage and get moving.

Courage is just remembering what's important. Courage is choosing to do what will matter in the long run ... now, not someday.

You will never regret doing what makes you happier, healthier, more fulfilled.

You'll only regret playing it safe, letting fear win, and not doing the things that will create the quality of life and work you want, need and deserve.

Next time you're about to procrastinate on a little thing, a big thing or an important thing, remind yourself, "**Now is the new later.**" 📌





Info



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About the author

Sam Horn—CEO of the [Intrigue Agency](#), international keynote speaker, [TEDx speaker](#), author, and book consultant—is on a mission to help people create the life, work, and relationships of their dreams. She has spoken to more than half a million people worldwide and her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, on NPR, and taught to Boeing, Intel, ASAE, Cisco, Accenture, Capital One, YPO. Sam's new book, *Someday is Not a Day in the Week*, from which this manifesto was adapted, was recommended by Library Journal and endorsed by Sheri Salata (former Executive Producer for The Oprah Winfrey Show) who calls Sam, "One of the brightest lights and most accessible wisdom-sharers in our culture today."

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