Procrastination and Getting Unstuck

THE TALKING THERAPIES UK SELF-HELP SERIES



Procrastination and Getting Unstuck

A Step-by-Step Guide to Overcoming Avoidance and Taking Action

A self-help workbook · 8 modules · about 8 weeks

TALKING THERAPIES UK

First edition · 2026

Published by Talking Therapies UK, talkingtherapies.co.uk.

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First edition, 2026.

This workbook accompanies the Procrastination and Getting Unstuck programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. Its text is drawn from the programme and is kept current with it: whenever the programme changes, the workbook is set again.

Revision 9. This printing was set on 15 November 2026 from the programme as it stood that day.

A note on using this workbook. It offers self-help based on established psychological approaches for difficulties of mild to moderate severity. It is not a substitute for assessment or treatment by a qualified professional and is not designed for use in a crisis. The examples in it are fictional; no real person appears in them. If you are worried about your safety, or your difficulties are getting worse, the page headed “When self-help is not enough” says where to turn.

Set in Poppins and Roboto, the Talking Therapies UK typefaces.

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How to use this workbook

This self-help programme is designed for adults struggling with chronic procrastination, task avoidance, and difficulties with initiation. Drawing directly from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and behavioural activation principles, the programme helps you understand the emotional drivers of delay and provides practical, evidence-based tools to build momentum. Over a structured series of modules, you will learn to break tasks down, manage perfectionism, tolerate discomfort, and sustain long-term motivation with the support of a practitioner.

This workbook is the written form of the Procrastination and Getting Unstuck programme on the Talking Therapies UK self-help platform. It follows the programme module by module: each part of the book is one module, and each chapter is one piece of the module's teaching, set in the order the programme presents it.

Read the chapters of a part in order, then turn to the worksheets that follow them. The worksheets are the part of the work that changes things, so give them the time they ask for and come back to them as the weeks go on. You may copy or print the worksheets for your own use, as often as you need.

Most people work through one module a week, which takes the whole programme about 8 weeks. Go at the pace that suits you: a module done properly is worth more than two done quickly.

The check-in questionnaires let you see how things are changing. Complete each one when you reach it, note the date and your total, and compare it with the last.

When self-help is not enough

- If you are in danger now, or have seriously harmed yourself, call 999 or go to your nearest accident and emergency department.
- If you need help urgently but it is not an emergency, call NHS 111 or contact your GP surgery.
- Samaritans are there day and night, every day of the year: call 116 123 free from any phone.
- If you would rather not talk, text SHOUT to 85258 for free, confidential support at any hour.
- If your difficulties are getting worse as you work through this book, or you find yourself thinking about ending your life, stop and speak to your GP or a mental health professional. A workbook can be a good start, and some difficulties need more help than a book can give.

What this workbook will help you to do

- Examine the cycle of procrastination and how emotional avoidance fuels task delay. Identify your personal procrastination triggers and the immediate versus long-term consequences of avoidance.
- Recognise how unhelpful thoughts, such as all-or-nothing thinking and high self-expectations, contribute to paralysis. Practise cognitive restructuring techniques to adopt more flexible, encouraging perspectives.
- Learn the principles of task decomposition and graded exposure to reduce the threat response

associated with overwhelming projects. Create actionable, bite-sized steps that lower the barrier to starting.

- Understand the relationship between mood, avoidance, and activity levels. Use structured activity scheduling and implementation intentions (if-then plans) to bridge the gap between intention and action.
- Develop distress tolerance skills to manage the urge to flee from boring, difficult, or ambiguous tasks. Practise mindfulness and acceptance strategies to stay present with uncomfortable emotions.
- Identify internal and external attention stealers that derail focus. Design a supportive, distraction-minimised environment and establish clear boundaries to protect your time and energy.
- Shift away from harsh self-criticism, which paradoxically increases future procrastination. Cultivate self-compassion to recover quickly from unproductive days and re-engage with your goals.
- Review your progress and consolidate the practical skills and psychological strategies learned throughout the programme. Create a personalised relapse prevention plan to navigate future high-risk periods effectively.

PART 1

Understanding Procrastination

Why we delay and what keeps us stuck

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to Module 1: Understanding Procrastination

Welcome to Module 1 of Procrastination and Getting Unstuck. This self-help programme is made up of eight modules, each designed to help you understand why you delay tasks and, more importantly, how to build the skills to get moving again. It draws on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and behavioural activation, both of which have strong evidence for helping with chronic procrastination, task avoidance and feeling stuck. You won't be asked to simply "try harder." Instead, you'll learn to notice what is happening in your mind and body at the moment you avoid something, and to respond to yourself in a more helpful, compassionate way.

This first module is about understanding. Before we can change a habit, we need to see how it works. You'll explore the cycle of procrastination, the emotional triggers that spark delay, and the surprising payoff that makes avoidance so tempting. We'll also look at the real long-term costs that keep the cycle going. There is nothing wrong with you for procrastinating; it is a pattern that has developed for understandable reasons, often as a way of protecting yourself from discomfort. As we go through the programme, you'll be supported to loosen that pattern, one small step at a time.

You may be working through these modules with a practitioner, or you may be using them on your own. Either way, we encourage you to go gently. Change doesn't happen all at once. Some modules will ask you to pause and reflect; others will invite you to try small experiments. Please be kind to yourself as you begin.

A NOTE

Throughout this programme, we'll use the word "task" loosely. It could mean work, admin, housework, study, caring responsibilities, creative projects or even social commitments. Bring to mind the situations where you most often get stuck.

CHAPTER 2

The Procrastination Cycle: How Avoidance Takes Hold

Welcome to the first module of the Procrastination and Getting Unstuck programme. This eight-module self-help course is carefully structured: each module builds on the last, combining clear psychoeducation with practical tools you can try between modules. Over the coming weeks you will learn how thoughts, feelings and behaviours interact to keep you stuck, and you will develop step-by-step strategies – drawn from cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and behavioural activation – to break that cycle.

In this opening module we focus on the basic shape of the procrastination cycle. The model is simple but powerful: a task triggers an uncomfortable feeling, you try to avoid that feeling, the avoidance provides short-term relief, and the relief reinforces the avoidance pattern. Over time the brain learns that putting off the task is the quickest way to feel better, even though the longer-term costs (stress, missed deadlines, self-criticism) grow larger.

Step 1 – The Trigger

A trigger can be anything that signals a task needs to be done: an email, a calendar reminder, a mental note, or even a vague sense that something 'should' be completed. Research shows that when a trigger is linked to a perceived threat – for example, fear of not being perfect or fear of criticism – the brain's limbic system lights up, producing anxiety or dread (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013). Those feelings are uncomfortable, and the brain's natural response is to seek safety.

Step 2 – The Emotional Response

The uncomfortable feeling is often labelled 'anxiety', 'stress', 'self-doubt' or simply 'discomfort'. In CBT terms this is an emotional cue that signals a need for coping. The faster the cue appears, the more urgent the urge to escape becomes. Studies of procrastination have found that people with higher trait anxiety are more likely to delay tasks that they judge as threatening (Sirois, 2014).

Step 3 – The Avoidance Behaviour

Avoidance can take many forms: checking social media, tidying the desk, making a cup of tea, or simply doing nothing. Because these activities remove the uncomfortable feeling – at least temporarily – they provide a brief sense of relief. That relief is rewarding, so the brain stores the avoidance response as a habit.

Step 4 – Short-Term Relief

The immediate payoff is real – you feel calmer for a few minutes. This is why procrastination feels so tempting, even when you know it will cause problems later. The relief is a classic example of negative reinforcement: the removal of an unpleasant feeling strengthens the behaviour that produced it.

Step 5 – Long-Term Cost

The cost accumulates as the deadline approaches: mounting pressure, rushed work, lower quality output, and a harsh inner critic that blames you for 'wasting time'. Over weeks and months this

pattern can erode self-esteem and increase stress-related health issues (Sirois, 2016).

Putting the Cycle Together

When you can see the five steps as a loop, you gain a point of intervention. The next modules will teach you how to interrupt each link – first by recognising the trigger, then by tolerating the uncomfortable feeling, and finally by replacing avoidance with purposeful action.

A NOTE

Tip: Keep a simple log for the next two days. Write down every time you notice a task trigger, the feeling that follows, and the behaviour you choose instead. This 'awareness sheet' is the first concrete step towards breaking the cycle.

Emma receives an email at 6 pm asking her to prepare a presentation for a meeting the next morning. The trigger (email) sparks a wave of anxiety about not being perfect. She feels the urge to scroll through Instagram – a low-effort activity that quickly lifts her mood. She spends an hour scrolling, feels briefly relieved, then realises the presentation is still undone. The next morning she rushes, makes mistakes, and feels guilty about the wasted evening. By mapping Emma's experience onto the five-step cycle, we see exactly where an alternative response could have been inserted – for instance, a brief 5-minute breathing exercise to sit with the anxiety before moving to the next step.

Understanding the cycle is the foundation for the work ahead. In the next block we will explore why the emotional cue feels so powerful and how to spot the personal triggers that set the cycle in motion.

CHAPTER 3

Consequences of Delay: Immediate Relief vs Long-Term Cost

Now that you can spot the triggers that set the procrastination cycle in motion, it is time to look at the outcomes of the choices you make. Understanding the trade-off between short-term relief and long-term cost helps to motivate change and provides a clear rationale for the strategies you will learn later in the programme.

1. The Immediate Reward of Avoidance

When you avoid a task, your brain releases dopamine, the neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. The relief is real: switching to something easy and absorbing, such as scrolling social media, feels rewarding for a few minutes. The relief feels like a 'quick fix', reinforcing the avoidance behaviour each time it is used.

2. The Hidden Price of Short-Term Relief

While the dopamine surge feels good, it comes with hidden costs:

- Accumulating Stress: The undone task remains in your mind, often as a background worry that raises cortisol levels (Sirois, 2014).
- Reduced Self-Efficacy: Repeated avoidance erodes confidence in your ability to start and finish tasks, creating a negative feedback loop.
- Opportunity Loss: Time spent on avoidance is time not spent on productive or enjoyable activities, shrinking the window for leisure later.

3. Long-Term Consequences

The longer you delay, the larger the gap between your intentions and reality becomes. This gap manifests in several ways:

- Performance Decline: Rushed work often leads to errors, lower grades, or missed deadlines, which can affect career progression or academic standing.
- Emotional Burden: Chronic procrastination is linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and lower life satisfaction (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013).
- Physical Health Impact: Persistent stress can contribute to sleep disturbances, weakened immune function, and cardiovascular risk (Sirois, 2016).

4. A Comparative Exercise – The 'Cost Calculator'

To make the abstract costs concrete, try a simple calculation. Write down a recent instance of procrastination and fill in the table:

Task · Time Spent Avoiding · Immediate Mood Boost (0-10) · Estimated Stress Increase (0-10) · Consequence (e.g., missed deadline, lower quality)

Example: Write report · 2 hours scrolling · 6 · 8 · Submitted late, received lower grade

Add up the scores. The higher the total, the greater the overall cost of that episode of avoidance.

Seeing the numbers can be a powerful motivator to change.

A NOTE

Warning: If you notice that the stress scores are consistently high, consider seeking additional support from a mental-health professional. Persistent high stress can signal underlying mood disorders that may need targeted treatment.

5. Worked Example – Mark's Tax Return

Mark, a 34-year-old accountant, puts off filing his tax return until the night before the deadline. He spends the afternoon watching a documentary, feeling a brief lift in mood (rating 7/10). As the night progresses, his stress rating climbs to 9/10. He rushes the filing, makes a mistake, and later receives a penalty notice. The long-term cost includes a financial penalty (£150), a dent in his professional reputation, and increased anxiety about future tax filings.

By breaking down Mark's experience with the Cost Calculator, we see:

- Time Avoiding: 4 hours
- Immediate Mood Boost: 7
- Stress Increase: 9
- Consequence: £150 penalty + anxiety

If Mark had used a 10-minute "break-down" technique (introduced in later modules) to start the return, he could have reduced avoidance time by at least 2 hours, likely avoiding the penalty and the subsequent anxiety.

6. The Motivational Gap

Behavioural economics describes this as a present bias: the tendency to overvalue immediate rewards and undervalue future outcomes. Procrastination is a classic example of present bias in action. By making the future costs more vivid – through tools like the Cost Calculator – you can re-balance the scales in favour of long-term wellbeing.

7. Linking Back to the Cycle

Recall the five-step cycle from Module 1. The 'Long-Term Cost' sits at the end of the loop, feeding back into the next trigger (e.g., a reminder of the missed deadline). By reducing the immediate reward (through mindful pauses) and increasing awareness of the long-term cost, you weaken the reinforcement that keeps the loop turning.

8. Preparing for the Next Steps

In the upcoming modules you will learn concrete strategies to replace avoidance with activation – small, purposeful actions that move you towards your goals while tolerating discomfort. For now, keep using the Trigger Map and Cost Calculator together; they form a feedback system that highlights both the why and the what of your procrastination.

"The greatest mistake you can make is to be continually fearing you will make a mistake." – Elbert Hubbard

By recognising the fleeting nature of the dopamine-driven relief and the substantial, often hidden,

costs that accrue, you lay the groundwork for lasting change. The next module will introduce the first activation technique: breaking tasks into micro-steps that feel manageable, even when anxiety is present.

WORKSHEET

Your Procrastination Thought Record: Mapping a Moment of Delay

This exercise helps you catch the exact moment procrastination happens. Rather than thinking in general terms like “I always avoid things,” choose one recent, specific task you delayed. It might be from today or the past few days. Try to picture it clearly: where you were, what the task was, what you did instead.

In your notebook or on a phone note, write down the following for that moment. If you find it hard, start with just the first few lines. There are no wrong answers.

The situation: What were you meant to be doing? What prompted you to think about it?

Emotions: What did you feel? Common feelings include anxiety, boredom, dread, guilt, shame, frustration or even numbness.

Physical signals: What did you notice in your body? For example, tight shoulders, a churning stomach, restlessness, heaviness, shallow breathing.

Automatic thoughts: What ran through your mind? Try to capture the exact words, such as “I’ll do it later,” “I’m not ready,” “It won’t be good enough,” or “This is unbearable.”

What you did: What did you do instead? Perhaps you scrolled on your phone, tidied something else, made a cup of tea, or simply sat staring.

Short-term payoff: What felt better in the moment? Be honest. Maybe you felt relief, a sense of control, or a brief escape from pressure.

Long-term cost: What has this delay cost you? Think about stress, sleep, self-confidence, relationships, money, or missed opportunities.

Situation: Sitting at the kitchen table with the tax form open on my laptop, at 7pm on Sunday. Emotions: Dread, anxiety, self-criticism. Physical signals: Heavy chest, tight jaw, urge to yawn. Automatic thoughts: “I don’t even know where to start. I always mess this up. It’ll take hours. I might as well wait until I can focus.” What I did: Closed the laptop and watched television for three hours. Short-term payoff: Immediate relief and a feeling of not having to face it. Long-term cost: Lost the evening, felt guilty next day, and the task stayed hanging over me, making every other part of the week feel heavier.

If you notice the urge to rush through this or do it perfectly, pause. You are collecting information, not being tested. The more honestly you can describe what happens, the better equipped you’ll be to change it.

CHAPTER 4

Reflecting on Your Pattern

Now that you have mapped one moment of delay, take a few minutes to step back and reflect. Read over what you wrote, and notice any patterns. Does the same emotion keep appearing? Is the short-term payoff always a form of relief? What does the immediate reward cost you in the longer run?

Think about the purpose procrastination may serve for you. It is rarely just laziness. Often, it is a way of protecting yourself from difficult feelings: fear of failure, fear of judgement, overwhelm, perfectionism, or even fear of succeeding and raising expectations. In the moment, avoidance genuinely works to reduce distress. That is why it becomes a habit. Yet, as you saw in the thought record, the relief is temporary, and the long-term bill can be high.

Consider these questions and jot down whatever comes to mind:

- What is the most familiar part of this cycle for you?
- Which feeling do you usually avoid by delaying?
- What would you lose if procrastination no longer worked as a short-term escape?
- What might you gain if you could tolerate a little more discomfort?

“I used to think I was lazy. Now I can see I was afraid — afraid of not doing it perfectly, and afraid of the uncomfortable feelings that came with starting. It’s not about laziness at all.”

There is no need to solve everything today. This reflection is simply about noticing, with curiosity rather than criticism. You are building a clearer picture of your own internal weather, and that is the first step towards change.

CHAPTER 5

Module 1 Summary: Seeing the Cycle Clearly

In this first module, you have looked closely at the cycle of procrastination and how emotional avoidance keeps it going. The key idea is simple but powerful: we do not delay tasks because we are lazy. We delay because, at that moment, avoidance offers us relief from an uncomfortable feeling. That relief is real, which is why the habit sticks. But it is short-lived, and the long-term cost — stress, guilt, lost opportunity, anxiety, self-doubt — tends to grow the longer we avoid.

You explored your own emotional triggers: the anxiety, dread, boredom, perfectionism, or overwhelm that signal "I don't want to feel this." You noticed the physical signals too, such as tension, restlessness, or fatigue. These are not signs that you cannot do the task; they are part of the alarm system that drives avoidance. By mapping one specific moment in the thought record, you began to separate the situation from the story you tell yourself about it. You saw the moment of decision where avoidance wins, and the brief payoff that follows. You also named the long-term costs, which are the real price of staying stuck.

If you completed the exercise, you are not just reading about procrastination; you are actively investigating your own pattern. That puts you in a strong position for the rest of the programme. Future modules will help you break tasks down, challenge unhelpful thoughts, tolerate discomfort, and build momentum with small, doable actions. For now, hold onto what you have learned.

A NOTE

Between now and the next module, simply notice how often the cycle shows up in everyday life. You don't need to change anything yet. Just observe the triggers, the feelings, the urge to avoid, and the relief that follows. Awareness is the beginning of choice.

Thank you for engaging with this module. Be proud of yourself for taking this step. Understanding procrastination is not the whole journey, but it is the foundation on which everything else will be built.

CHECK-IN

Mood check-in (PHQ-9)

Before you begin, take a few minutes to complete this short questionnaire. It is the same one used in NHS Talking Therapies and gives us a baseline against which to measure your progress over the programme.

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

	Not at all (0)	Several days (1)	More than half the days (2)	Nearly every day (3)
1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things	0	1	2	3

2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	0	1	2	3
3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much	0	1	2	3
4. Feeling tired or having little energy	0	1	2	3
5. Poor appetite or overeating	0	1	2	3
6. Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down	0	1	2	3
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television	0	1	2	3
8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual	0	1	2	3
9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way	0	1	2	3

Total: _____ Date: _____

Add up the numbers you have circled. A total of 0 to 4 suggests minimal symptoms of depression, 5 to 9 mild, 10 to 14 moderate, 15 to 19 moderately severe and 20 to 27 severe. Note your total and the date, so you can compare the next check-in with this one.

If you circled anything other than 0 for the last question, please talk to your GP or call NHS 111 today. If you are in danger now, call 999.

The PHQ-9 and GAD-7 were developed by Drs Robert L. Spitzer, Janet B. W. Williams, Kurt Kroenke and colleagues, with an educational grant from Pfizer Inc. No permission is required to reproduce, translate, display or distribute them.

CHECK-IN

Everyday life check-in (WSAS)

And one more short questionnaire about how things are affecting everyday life: work, home, social life, relationships and leisure. Functioning often recovers on a different timetable to symptoms, and it matters just as much.

This check-in uses the WSAS (Work and Social Adjustment Scale). If you are using the online programme, complete it there, where your scores are kept and compared for you. If you are working from this book alone, your GP or therapist can give you a copy.

WORKSHEET

Taking this forward

Before you move on, take two minutes to make this module harder to lose. Skills fade fastest in exactly the moments they are needed most, so the work here is to decide now, while things are steady, what you will reach for when they are not.

If things ever feel much worse rather than better, that is a signal to reach out rather than push on

alone: use the messaging button to contact the practice, speak to your GP, or if you feel unsafe right now contact 999 or the Samaritans on 116 123.

Three short answers, in your own words. First: what single idea or skill from this module do you most want to keep? Second: when, realistically, will it be hardest to use, name the actual situation. Third: what exactly will you do in that moment? Write it as a sentence you could follow when stressed.

PART 2

Unravelling Thoughts and Beliefs

Challenging perfectionism and catastrophic thinking

CHAPTER 6

Introduction to Module 2: Unravelling Thoughts and Beliefs

Welcome back to your self-help journey. In Module 1, we looked closely at the physical and behavioural patterns of procrastination, mapping out how avoidance temporarily relieves stress while actually maintaining it in the long run. Now that you are more aware of how you delay, it is time to look beneath the surface at why it happens. Often, the engine driving our procrastination is not laziness or poor time management, but rather our thoughts.

When faced with a daunting task, our minds can quickly generate a flurry of unhelpful predictions, rigid rules, and sky-high expectations. Thoughts like “If I cannot do this perfectly, there is no point doing it at all” or “This report is going to be terrible and everyone will judge me” create an immense wave of emotional distress. To protect ourselves from this anticipated failure or discomfort, our brain chooses the easiest route available: immediate avoidance.

A NOTE

Procrastination is rarely a time-management problem; it is frequently an emotion-regulation problem driven by the stories we tell ourselves about a task.

In this module, we will explore how perfectionism and catastrophic thinking paralyse our decision-making and stall our momentum. By learning to recognise these internal obstacles, you can begin to step back, examine your thoughts objectively, and test whether they are actually true or helpful. Through evidence-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques, you will practise shifting away from rigid self-criticism towards a balanced, encouraging inner voice that makes getting started feel much more manageable. Let us dive into the practical tools that will help you untangle these thoughts and clear the path to action.

The end of the sample

This is a free sample of “Procrastination and Getting Unstuck”, and it ends here.

Everything you have read here is from the opening of the book, set exactly as it is printed in it. The rest follows in the same way, chapter by chapter, with its worksheets, its examples and its reference list.

The full book is on sale in the Talking Therapies UK shop. A copy is yours to keep, as a PDF and an ebook, licensed to you by name: a short line saying so is printed at the foot of each page of the PDF and on the title page of the ebook.