



“To be or not to be, that is the question!”

This is one of the most famous quotes in the world of literature, written by William Shakespeare many centuries ago. The quote is from the play “Hamlet”, where Hamlet is trying to decide whether or not he should avenge the death of his father, the King.

Hamlet is famous for being the world’s most renowned procrastinator. He puts off and puts off killing King Claudius, his treacherous uncle, which ultimately results in his untimely murder and that of his mother. Yep, it ends pretty badly for Hamlet.

But one of the main reasons Hamlet has been popular for centuries is that Hamlet is a character we can all relate to and his major flaw, procrastination, is one we can all recognise and understand. He is a very real character.

At some point in our lives we are all guilty of having procrastinated; put off something we could have done easily and quickly at one time, only to have it compound into a greater burden at a later time. I do it all the time with my washing. I put it in the machine, drag it out, but put off hanging it on the clothesline. The consequence is that the clothes get smelly and I have to drag them back into the machine and put them through the cycle again. And I still have to hang them up. It’s a chore that takes only a few minutes, but for some reason I think it will take so much longer and avoid it.

You know what I’m talking about here. Procrastinating about doing homework or doing study. “I’ll do it later,” or “I don’t feel like doing it right now,” are two common phrases we use. There are a thousand things we’d rather do. It’s easier to put it off until later.

So we tell ourselves we’ll just wait until our friend Snap Chats us back. Or watch just one more clip on YouTube. Or we’ll do it just after we FaceTime a friend. Or after we rearrange our sock drawer.... Anything to get out of that dreadful chore of studying. All the time, we cannot be completely relax because there is a nagging thought in the back of our minds that we should be studying, should be getting some work done, should be...

We keep talking ourselves out of it and the issue compounds. Time keeps passing and we've not yet done anything. We've not written flashcards, learned those definitions, written the revision sheets, done the practice questions. Then the date of the test or exam seems to come around waaaay too quickly and we regret our procrastination. "Why didn't I just do it?" we think to ourselves. And then we get down on ourselves, tell ourselves we're not any good at all of this, or give in to feelings of guilt, panic and being overwhelmed.

So why don't we just get that study out of the way and enjoy our free time? It's easy to get distracted or allow ourselves to get distracted by things that are much more fun and much easier and that we get greater satisfaction out of doing. As intelligent human beings, we also have the instinctive habit of talking ourselves out of doing something we don't really want to do.

Just like Hamlet, we deliberate, use avoidance techniques and convince ourselves that the time is not yet right; that we'll do it later and all will be okay. This is true for a while. We continue telling ourselves this because we've gotten away with it so far. Then all of a sudden it is "later", the task needs to be done and we are not okay.

So what can we do when we have the habit of putting things off?

- Don't overthink it. Use simple self-talk, mantras or repetitive phrases like: "Let's do this," "I can do this," and "Come on, let's get started", but don't allow your mind to get into further conversation and debate with itself or you'll talk yourself out of it before you've even started.
- Remind yourself constantly that there's no such thing as "later". It gets done "now" or not at all. It will take 30 seconds to do it now or, if you leave it til later, it will take 3 hours when everything compounds into a stressful meltdown.
- Chunk your work into achievable bits. Make a list or mind map of what you have to achieve with your study time, but make them small tasks. Instead of "Study", put "10 flashcards for German", "mind map for Science chapter", "start Maths cheat sheet" etc. This will ultimately make things seem a bit more achievable, especially if you can talk yourself into just getting started on the first bit; ten flashcards will probably take less than ten minutes. It feels good and can be motivating to tick the list off with a flourish as you complete each chunk.

- Ask a parent or carer, friend or mentor how they would get started on the work. Sometimes sharing the problem helps share the load and makes you feel like you're not alone.
- Avoid using procrastination as an excuse. "I always procrastinate". "I always leave things til last minute". You can change this and not let procrastination win by stopping this thought path. "I'm not going to procrastinate anymore" or "I used to procrastinate, but now I get it done" are much more productive.
- Trade off. We'd all like the finished product to be absolutely perfect, but sometimes the pressure we put on ourselves to have everything perfect actually freezes our ability to get started. There's no hope of something being "good enough" if it hasn't even been done! Handing up an imperfect, finished work will get you better grades than not handing anything up because you didn't start it. And it will be okay!!
- Take the anxiety out of it. We worry all the time. We even worry that we're procrastinating too much, worry we won't finish our work, worry our stuff won't be good enough, worry we won't get good marks, worry that we'll do badly on a test even though it's weeks away. In the end, it's not the work or lack of it that will let us down, it's the worry that becomes crippling, preventing us from being able to do anything and potentially having longer term issues with our mental health. We're thinking too far ahead and not focussing on the NOW. Let go of your worry. To quote the movie Frozen: "Let it Go, Let it Go". Breathe, relax. Tell yourself it's ok. Then you're in a better mindset to start.
- Start. Sit down. Pick up a pen. Start writing. The rest will come. It's like the famous "Nike" sport shoe slogan, "Just do it". Don't think about how hard it's going to be or how unfair it is. Don't talk yourself out of it. Just put your shoes on and run.

Put procrastination behind you and cross the finishing line with energy to spare, not, alas, like poor Hamlet.