

Feeling Burnt Out or Depleted? Procrastinating? Break the Avoidance Cycle.

I've heard many students talking about feeling depleted and burnt out and tending more toward procrastination at this juncture in the semester. It's understandable, common every spring, but also not inevitable. But, given all that's going on, it can be a problem that needs to be addressed.

When exhausted or overwhelmed, we can get into a behavioral pattern or cycle of avoidance because our energy and attention are really taxed, which in turn contributes to putting off important tasks in favor of unimportant, less-demanding ones or simply escaping distractions like YouTube videos or social media. Don't beat yourself up about it, but if this cycle of avoidance sounds familiar, try watching this [TEDx Princeton](#) talk to understand the roots of procrastination and use this [TEDEd lesson](#) to prevent or overcome procrastination and break the cycle.

The avoidance cycle typically starts with a bit of dread or anxiety about a task (paper, p-set, etc.) that may be effortful, require reaching out for help, or be challenging in some ways. When we open our laptop to start that p-set an uncomfortable feeling rises in our gut. That feeling unsettles and dissuades us from getting started and instead we are distracted (or attracted) to another activity that is less demanding or provides relief from our discomfort. This aversion/diversion can "work" in the short-run—we no longer feel as intensely the dread or anxiety that agitated us and unsettled our mind—and so our avoidance is reinforced. We may do 'necessary' but less important tasks (e.g. email) or engage in mindgames to justify (and there are lots of legitimate justifications right now) escape into entertainment or distractions. Once we stop engaging in these diversions, however, we often feel GREATER anxiety or dread as we realize that we are in a worse situation as a result of our actions because the task remains and we have less time to do it (and, often, don't feel more refreshed or energized as we'd hope). This can lead us to feel guilty and berate ourselves, thus adding these unhelpful feelings to our dread and contributing to our feeling of overwhelm which further compromises our clarity of decision-making and strategizing. That's a lot to deal with; no wonder we feel stuck. This cascade of behaviors feeds on itself and worsens our situation while reinforcing itself. We may feel like we've dug ourselves a hole and are continuing to deepen it even as we are aware that we are doing so and that the consequences will be bad for us.

It may not be simple or easy to break this cycle, but it is important to point out that most of us who have experienced it have also gotten out of it. We've gotten on track and devoted our efforts to the necessary activity or task and got it done. So, there is hope, and hope is a good first step. Getting rest and relaxation to energize ourselves is another good step. We all need rest and relaxation, so the point of the examination of the cycle above is not that taking a break from work is bad or wrong—it's actually essential for productivity and wellbeing. Rather, the point is to demonstrate that you must take care of yourself to manage stress in order to make progress on tasks that matter to you and are effortful and require time and attention. If you are seeking rejuvenation by taking breaks (highly recommended), ask yourself whether scrolling social media and watching a string of videos is truly providing rejuvenation. If not, you probably want to interrupt this cycle by giving yourself a genuine break, putting aside work for a demarcated time (set an alarm) and reducing mental stimulation and cognitive load and doing something that lifts your mood and builds energy. Disconnecting from all media, listening (or better yet dancing) to some upbeat music, exercising for 5-10 minutes, having a quick nutritious snack, or meditating, praying or just 'non-doing' and 'being' for a set period of time can all be rejuvenating, adding to your energy.

Maybe you are concerned that if you stop working at all, you won't resume working. Understood. That's why it's important to plan a BREAK—not just plan stopping. After all, a break has a starting AND ending time. To ensure you return to meaningful tasks, set a timer, write out the concrete steps you will take to resume or start the task (and put it where you'll see it before scrolling on your phone, etc.), arrange your physical space and materials to make avoidance/distraction harder and getting started easier (close your laptop, put your textbook on top of it with a pen and post-it notes), and limit the amount of time you plan to work (say 30-60 minutes) so that you don't dread an interminable study marathon the thought of which can dissuade you from getting started. Manage your virtual environment by closing out of unhelpful programs, using blocking apps like [Intention](#) and the ironically named Self-Control, or simply go offline and put your phone in another space, out of sight and easy access.

This is one way to interrupt an avoidance cycle and ignite a productive engagement cycle instead. Use other techniques, if you have them. Meet with a [McGraw learning consultant](#) to learn still more. For other techniques and tools, including "motivational stacking, for preventing and overcoming procrastination, watch the [TEDx talk](#) and use the [TEDEd lesson](#) mentioned above.