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## **Procrastination in College Students is a Marker for Unhealthy Behaviors, Study Indicates**

By  
DAVID GLENN

College students who procrastinate in their academic work are also likely to have unhealthy sleep, diet, and exercise patterns, according to one of several studies presented here last week by scholars at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association.

The researchers hope their work will help faculty members and counseling centers effectively respond to students' self-defeating habits.

Procrastination is closely linked to "avoidant coping styles" -- the tendency to neglect problems that cause anxiety rather than confront them -- according to a [study of 374 undergraduates](#) conducted by Fuschia M. Sirois, a doctoral candidate in psychology at Carleton University, in Ottawa, and her colleague Timothy A. Pychyl, an associate professor of psychology.

Such avoidant styles translate not only into late term papers but also to higher rates of smoking, drinking, and a tendency to postpone seeing a doctor for acute health problems. Ms. Sirois and Mr. Pychyl also found that procrastinators have significantly higher rates of digestive ailments, insomnia, and cold and flu symptoms than the student population at large.

Their research and similar studies released here suggest that a frequent, common-sense remedy for procrastination -- improving one's time management -- isn't an effective solution to the syndrome.

"Telling someone who procrastinates to buy a weekly planner is like telling someone with chronic depression to just cheer up," said Joseph R. Ferrari, an associate professor of psychology at DePaul University who organized the conference panel with Mr. Pychyl.

But the model of "anxiety avoidance" is not the entire picture, according to Ms. Sirois and Mr. Pychyl's study. They recently reanalyzed their data to control for their subjects' avoidant coping styles, as measured by various personality inventories. Even with those coping styles bracketed out, the student procrastinators in their sample still consumed significantly more alcohol per week than those who did not procrastinate.

This suggests, said Mr. Pychyl, that the procrastinators may also have problems with impulse control and general self-regulation -- drinking more beers at a sitting (or whiling away more hours in a hammock) than they initially intend to.

Steven A. Scher, an associate professor of psychology at Eastern Illinois University, also presented data that appear to complicate the anxiety-avoidance model of procrastination. A common intuition is that procrastinators suffer from a "fear of failure." But in recent studies of undergraduates and elementary-school students, Mr. Scher and his colleagues have found that procrastinators are actually less anxious than the general population about how others perceive their success or failure.

Their anxiety instead takes the form of relatively high physiological stress at everyday hassles and social interactions. College-student procrastinators might postpone difficult work not so much because they fear a poor grade six weeks down the line as because they have low tolerance for the immediate pins and needles associated with sitting down to work on a given evening.

Student procrastinators are particularly vulnerable to two kinds of wishful thinking, according to Bruce W. Tuckman, a professor of educational policy and leadership at Ohio State University. Mr. Tuckman directs a large study-skills course with strict deadlines. In a [study completed this year](#), he found that the students in the class who complete their work late or at the last minute are prone to say to themselves things like, "I'm just waiting for the best time to do it," or, "I know I can pull it out at the last minute." Mr. Tuckman found, unsurprisingly, that both types of statements are simply rationalizations. Students who indicated that they frequently tell themselves such things did relatively poorly in the class.

In a separate study, Mr. Ferrari presented data about undergraduates' fraudulent excuses for late schoolwork. In a survey of undergraduate procrastinators at a selective university, 2.7 percent admitted to having falsely claimed that a grandmother had died. More common frauds include claims that the student's computer had failed or that a paper had been left behind in a dorm room. Mr. Ferrari found that students were significantly more likely to offer such lies to female instructors than to male ones.

Mr. Pychyl said that a major question for future investigation is whether procrastinators -- who often cram for exams at the last minute -- retain less knowledge over time than their nonprocrastinating peers. Mr. Pychyl and Ms. Sirois's study, like several others before it, found no correlation between students' procrastination levels and their grade-point averages.

"It's a hard nut to crack," said Mr. Tuckman in an interview. "If you look at the data on GPA, and then you look at Joe Ferrari's studies of excuses, it's clear that many procrastinators have found an antidote to their problem. And yet they keep telling us that procrastination makes them terribly anxious, and they wish they would stop."

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