

MY VICTORY OVER PROCRASTINATION

Discipline means different things to different people. For some women, it means going to the gym twice a week and not putting aside one's usual breakfast grapefruit for last night's leftover spaghetti. For me, being disciplined means sitting down at my desk and doing my work, and getting done whatever I've set out to do before getting up again. While that might not seem like a big deal to you, it's been a real triumph for me.

Perhaps I should explain that until recently, I had never been able to complete any assignment or execute any task except under the pressure of an imminent deadline. I'd studied for tests only moments before they were given, written papers only hours before they were due, read assignments just seconds before being called on in class.

Later on, at various jobs, the same patterns of procrastination and avoidance continued. And despite the fact that I did well at school and work, these patterns disturbed me. They added an element of anxiety to my life that seemed self-destructive and left me feeling bad about myself, with the sense that I never did quite as well as I could do. Moreover, I was always unhappily aware that my way of working was not the "right" way, but I put off doing anything about it with the same dexterity with which I put off doing work.

When I left office work to freelance, the problems became more pronounced. I no longer had any structure but the one I imposed on myself—and that could hardly be called productive, since it was based on putting things off until the last possible moment.

Working at home makes my situation somewhat unique, of course, but I've found it has a lot in common with other working situations. In fact, being in an office can sometimes make progress more difficult for the procrastinator. As a friend of mine who has done both pointed out, "When I was working at home, I knew when I was procrastinating. There's no way you can lie on your bed with the newspaper and fool yourself that you're working. But in an office, there are a lot of ways to fool yourself that you're doing something when you really aren't. For instance, you can

discuss a project with someone for an hour if you want, or do unimportant tasks as a way of putting off important ones."

Another friend, a paralegal, is forever finishing assignments moments before their presentation to clients, and she alternately bemoans and brags about her perennial race with deadlines. She says, with a somewhat superior air, that she works best under pressure. Pressed further, she admits to the nagging suspicion that she works this way less by choice than by compulsion, which means that she always feels "out of control and panicky."

It takes no pressure for a thirty-year-old sales executive for an international furniture company to admit that "I always put off whatever I have to do until the last possible moment. And then, if I'm successful at it, I congratulate myself for being so smart. If I'm unsuccessful, I tell myself I could have done better if I'd given myself more time. So I can't lose—except that I never feel really good about myself, so I actually lose all the time."

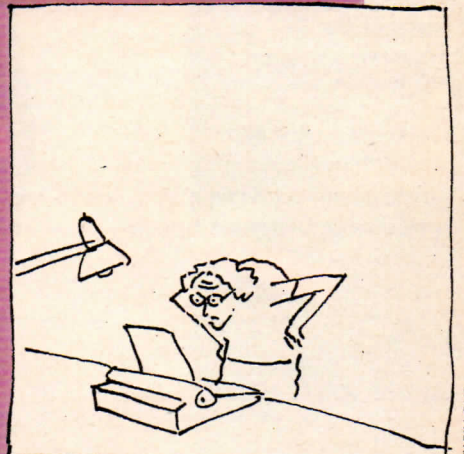
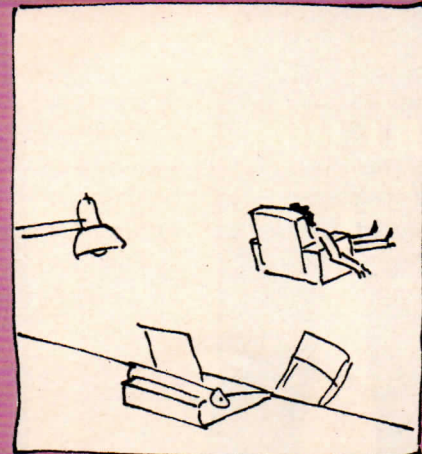
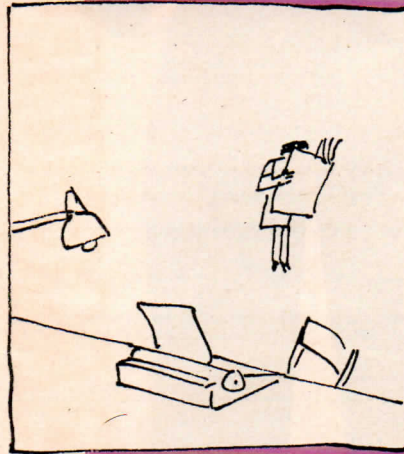
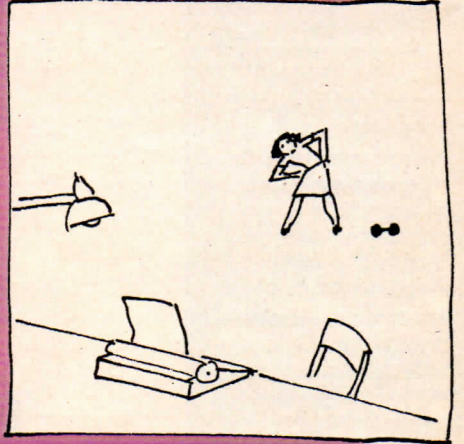
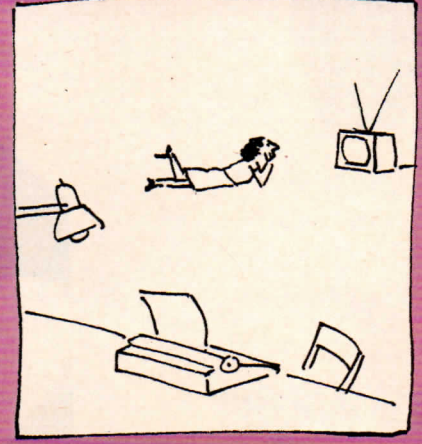
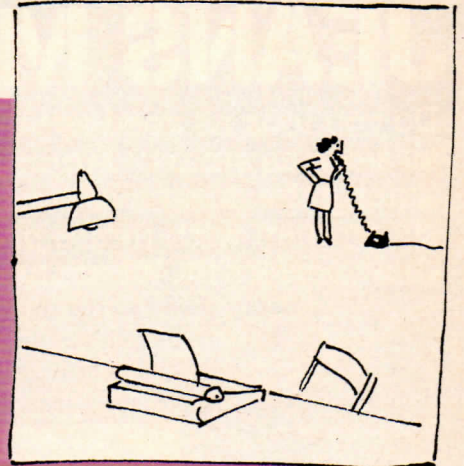
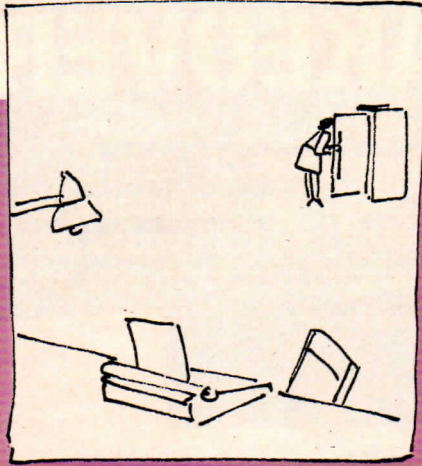
The point is this: We all know when we're not working to full capacity—and we all feel bad about it—even when we fool our overseers. The problem is that we can't fool ourselves, and we pay in self-doubt and anxiety.

In my case, push finally came to shove when I signed a contract to do a book. I found the enormity of this undertaking awesome, so I immediately set out to avoid it any way I could. I suddenly discovered an immediate need to paint my apartment; cleaned my bathroom every other day; called friends I hadn't seen since kindergarten.

But the more I tried to avoid my work, the more insistent the call to do it became, and the larger the task itself loomed. I became paralyzed, terrified by the thought that I could never complete the book, and that my career (not to mention my life) would turn to dust. To avoid this anticipated doom, I knew I had to change the age-old bad habits that no longer served, and I knew that I needed help to do it.

I was lucky. I knew a woman psychologist who had helped me before. She understood that, in terms of securing me (Continued on page 347)

by Bette-Jane Raphael



How I learned to get off the phone, away from the TV and the newspaper... and get to work!

GUY BILLOUT

PROCRASTINATION

Continued from page 304

immediate relief, it was less important to find out why I put off doing my work than it was to get me working. Right away she used a technique of behavior modification which, along with our other work together, permanently changed my approach to my work and my sense of myself as a working individual.

The first thing she had me do was write an admiring letter and include a donation to the most execrable person I could think of, someone whose principles are totally opposed to my own. Accordingly, I wrote the following letter: "Dear Phyllis Schlafly, I herewith enclose \$100 to help you in your fight against the ERA. I agree with you that these women's libbers are destroying the American family. I certainly don't want to go into the trenches with men or into the latrines, either. Yours sincerely . . ."

I gasped and giggled as I wrote those words, finding the act of being someone else and writing such silly but dangerous sentiments both funny and frightening. I signed the letter, addressed a stamped envelope to Mrs. Schlafly's anti-ERA organization, put a \$100 bill inside, and brought it to my therapist, who locked it in her desk drawer.

Then we got down to some real work. What, she asked me, did I actually want to accomplish on a daily basis? Could I finish ten pages of the first draft of a chapter of the book in one week, twenty pages of a second draft? This forced me to explore my capacities and consider where I wanted to be in my work at a particular time in the future—a kind of mini-career planning in which I'd never before engaged, and a good first step to long-range career planning.

My therapist always urged me to do a little more than I proposed, but not more than I felt I could handle. My goals decided, I would work with her to accomplish them. If I didn't, the implication was, the letter to Mrs. Schlafly would be sent. Whether my therapist would really have sent the letter or not, I don't know. I do know that this was a woman I trusted totally, someone who would never do me any harm. And she trusted me not to default cavalierly on our contracts. The existence of the letter was enough.

Through trial and error, I gradually learned what was realistic to expect of myself. At first I'd procrastinate as long as possible, fulfilling the contract just before my weekly therapy session. Later, we decided to have daily contracts, with me mailing proof of my work (usually carbon copies of my writing) every evening by a certain hour so it would have that day's postmark on it. We modified the procedure as we went, working together with humor, tolerance and, above all, a strict adherence to the spirit of the experiment.

This went on until the day, over a year later, that I discovered I no longer needed to make contracts with her in order to do my work. I could finally make them with myself, and keep them. We had a sort of graduation ceremony. My therapist unlocked her drawer, took out my letter with the \$100 bill inside, and handed it to me with the suggestion that I buy myself a luxurious present.

What the contracts with her had done, of course, was to create a bridge to self-regula-

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tion vis-à-vis work and externalize an inner procedure that I'd never properly developed. It was something like taking the motor out of a machine that isn't working, and then, when you've got it going again, putting it back inside. And the letter gave shape to an elusive principle: how we betray everything we believe in and want for ourselves when we don't do our work and thereby cheat ourselves of the feelings of pride and security that come with accomplishment.

I think this "shortchanging of self" is particular to women, however we're employed. The root of the problem is an upbringing that stresses getting satisfaction from the approval of others.

Pleasing our parents and teachers is fine,

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but if we do everything for the pleasure of others, we are in trouble. When it comes to work, if we look only to another's smile to obtain a sense of our own value, then we leave ourselves at the mercy of the world, and will ultimately rebel against serving its interests rather than our own. Procrastination, I think, is a form of rebellion, albeit a passive form in which we are the victims. It's the mother of anxiety and self-hate, feelings only temporarily assuaged by outside approval for a job *finally* well done.

Praise is terrific, but self-esteem is priceless and longer-lasting. It can't be given to us by others. It's a gift only we can give ourselves, and one way is by doing our work—taking ourselves seriously, and realizing what we do *matters*.

Learning to value our work and to do it for our own satisfaction brings unexpected rewards, including an acceptance of one's working self. The fact that I don't have the diligence of, say, Eleanor Roosevelt, doesn't necessarily make me Laverne and Shirley. Maybe my working self doesn't have the capacity to work as long or as hard as I would have liked, but she works longer and harder than the old, self-hating me would have expected.

These days I can even accept the fact that I'll probably always have something of the procrastinator in my soul, because I no longer see the term as disparaging. It's a legitimate part of my work process to sit on a project for a while. I realize now that I'm not merely sitting on something, I'm hatching it, and I can accept that as part of my particular pattern of thought and action.


Now I choose what I want to do every day, how much I'll achieve in the way of solid work and soft work (errands, housework, grooming, etc.), and how much I'll goof off. I can even be more flexible in my definition of achievement. Now that inner click comes not merely when I've written a certain number of pages, but at some point when I know I've done a good day's work.

One begins to crave the sort of comfort that comes from real accomplishment. If a day goes by in which I do *not* do what I intended, I feel more than vaguely uncomfortable, and I can't wait for the next day to make up for it. Those days still crop up. The important lessons, it seems, have to be learned repeatedly. But it's worth it, because good habits spill over into other areas of life.

I no longer try to substitute one kind of work for another—making the bed, for instance, does not equal making progress on a work assignment. But now I *do* make the bed, usually soon after I get out of it, and I pay the bills before those first reminders appear in the mail, and return phone calls before people write me off for good.

So, while the chances of my becoming a workaholic are slim, I am more disciplined than I ever expected to be. I don't think the method I used will work for everyone. If you do try it, remember that if it begins feeling oppressive, you can end it without feeling a failure. However, I think it's worth a try if you're dissatisfied with your work habits or feel like an undisciplined underachiever.

If that description rings a bell of recognition, look around. Surely we all have someone in our lives who cares about us, someone whom we would quite literally trust with our lives, who wouldn't mind doing duty for a while as conscience, taskmaster, confidant. This is the kind of person with whom contracts can be made until the moment when that inner mechanism clicks on and we can take over as our own trustees.

That's quite a moment. I wouldn't want anyone to miss it. 

Bette-Jane Raphael writes Glamour's "Can This Be Love?" column.

SIX WAYS TO STOP PUTTING THINGS OFF by Edwin C. Bliss

If you're one of the millions of people who haven't gotten around to overcoming procrastination, the following techniques can help you stop your delaying tactics *now*.

● *Pigeonholing* First of all, you need to clarify what has been causing you to put off your specific task. Ask yourself such questions as: "What's my problem? Indecision? Shyness? Boredom? Disorganization? Fear? Fatigue? Is there any one word or phrase that sums up why I haven't been able to get this task under way?"

The pigeonholing process involves categorizing your main trouble spots. When you attach an accurate label to a problem, the solution frequently becomes self-evident.

In the search for causes, however, be careful not to mistake excuses for reasons. Don't let yourself get away with such cop-

outs as, "I just haven't been able to find the time," or "There aren't enough hours in the day." Dig a little deeper. Face up to the *real* "why," not the rationalization.

● *The salami technique* If the main reason you procrastinate is that it just seems overwhelming, pause for a moment and do a little thinking on paper. List chronologically every step that must be taken to complete the job. The smaller the steps, the better—even little mini-tasks that will take only a minute or two should be listed separately.

Thinking about an overwhelming task is like looking at a large uncut salami: You don't feel you can get your teeth into it. But when you cut it into slices you transform it into something quite different. Cutting up your overwhelming task into tiny segments can have the same effect. Now, instead of looking at a gargantuan project, you're looking at a series of tiny tasks, each of which, is manageable. And if you're interrupted during the performance of the task you'll know precisely where to pick up when you return.

● *The five-minute plan* Some undertakings, of course, don't lend themselves to "salami slices." For example, if you have to tackle a big backlog of filing, there isn't any convenient way to break that kind of job down into "instant tasks."

In that case, make a deal with yourself to work on the task for only five minutes. At the end of that time, you're free to turn to something else, if you want to.

Set a timer, and if at the end of the five minutes you don't feel like continuing, don't. But before setting the task aside, jot down a time when you will invest another five

minutes.

● *The balance sheet method* Select some task you've been putting off. Now take a sheet of paper, and on the left side of the page list the reasons you're procrastinating; on the right side list the benefits of getting the job done. Compare the two lists. Generally you'll find the reasons for procrastinating so insipid, and the reasons for action so compelling, that you become disgusted with your indolence and swing into action.

Of course, sometimes the reasons for postponement may, on examination, be found to be valid, in which case you won't need to feel guilty. In other words, the method can help you decide whether or not to take a certain course of action. This weighing of alternatives is what we all do every time we approach a decision; the only "new" element is doing it on paper.

● *Talking to yourself* When you find yourself repeatedly postponing something you know you should do, talk to yourself out loud. (Some people find it helpful to address a mirror.) Be blunt, direct, honest. Ask yourself what's going on, and why you've failed to do things that you know should be done.

Then tell yourself what you're *going* to do, not what you *should* do. Commit yourself to a specific action at a specific time. Make it a pep talk: Assure yourself that you can do it.

Some people get even more benefit from a self-lecture if they record it. Then, whenever they're tempted to goof off, they can just play back what they said when they were in a more upbeat mood. It also provides another advantage for those who sim-

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