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A STRATEGIC  
PROGRAM FOR  
OVERCOMING  
PROCRASTINATION  
AND ENJOYING  
GUILT-FREE PLAY

**NEIL FIORE, PhD**



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neil A. Fiore, Ph.D., is a management consultant and licensed psychologist in private practice in Berkeley, California. He has served as a psychologist at the University of California and as a consultant to industry and health and educational institutions. He has been published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *Science Digest*, and *Boardroom Reports*, and has appeared on numerous radio and television programs across the country. Dr. Fiore is widely acknowledged as an expert in the areas of health psychology, optimal performance, stress management, and hypnosis.

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**T**his book is dedicated to all those people who had the courage and perseverance to seek help with the frustrating problem of procrastination. It has been written for all those who, in their quest for help, brought with them a battered sense of self-worth, a desire to save some part of themselves, and a burning conviction that they had some good work to contribute. But most especially, this book is for Elizabeth.

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# FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

It's been almost twenty years since *The Now Habit* was first published, and thirty years since I began to develop and test the strategies of putting guilt-free play into your schedule (creating an “Unschedule”) and “choosing to start” as ways to remove the obstacles to your natural motivation and optimal productivity.

Since then, in my seminars and private sessions with coaching and therapy clients, I've been challenged by some of the most entrenched forms of procrastination. Repeatedly, I've found that going back to Now Habit basics—the Unschedule, fifteen to thirty minutes of uninterrupted work, and using the Flow State/Centering exercise—works in most cases. *The Now Habit* has stood the test of time.

In this revised edition, I've refined and clarified some concepts and exercises, but the essential message of *The Now Habit* remains the same:

*Procrastination is a habit you develop to cope with anxiety about starting or completing a task. It is your attempted solution to cope with tasks that are boring or overwhelming. When you use the Now Habit strategies to lower your anxiety, fears,*

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*and self-doubts, you can stop using procrastination as an escape and can double your productivity and, often, double your income. When you learn to work efficiently—in the Flow State or Zone, using more of your brain-cell power—you have less reason to avoid important, top-priority tasks.*

The Now Habit frees you of shame and blame and moves you to a leadership perspective in your life. From this awakened sense of a larger, stronger self, you are free of the inner conflict between the inner voices of “you have to” versus “but I don’t want to.” You begin to live your life from *choice*—a leadership function of your higher, human brain and your new identity as a producer.

The Now Habit exercises help you break the cycle of procrastination by removing the stigma of calling yourself “a procrastinator” who’s burdened by having to get so many things done. Instead, you become like martial artists and peak-performing athletes who can push aside distracting thoughts and focus their attention on what they can do now. You don’t have to wait until you feel confident, motivated, or until you know it all; you start now and see what comes to you. You rapidly shift from not knowing to knowing—which is the essence of creativity.

Much has changed in the world since *The Now Habit* was first published in 1989. Surfing the Internet, instant messaging, e-mailing, and the use of cell phones have added to the number of distractions that can seduce us away from our mission of starting on a major project that could change our lives. Because these new devices give us an immediate response, they have an unfair competitive edge over activities that will not be rewarded until the end of the month or—as in the case of finishing school, writing a book, or learning

to play the piano—until after one to four years of intensive work. All the more reason to use the tools offered you by *The Now Habit*.

Another change is that readers of *The Now Habit* have contacted me for coaching on how to apply the book's strategies to managing others and to their personal lives as well as their work. This has given me additional insights into what you, the reader, need in order to make the Now Habit a powerful tool in shifting you from a Procrastinator (or an overwhelmed workaholic) into an efficient Producer who wants greater work-life balance.

We all need to use strategies and techniques to avoid the pain that many of my clients have expressed to me: the pain of finding yourself, once again, at the end of another day and another week thinking, "I didn't do any work on what matters most. I worked and kept busy, but I don't know what I did." This is the feeling that more and more of us are having as we become workaholics (the flip side of procrastination) who treat all tasks as urgent while avoiding the few, priority projects that contribute to the bottom-line and the satisfaction of doing something meaningful.

The changes in today's work setting—layoffs, cutbacks, and downsizing—mean that more of us are doing work that was once done by two or three, and more of us are starting our own businesses. We, very understandably, feel overwhelmed and burnt out. All the more reason to learn to focus and work in the "Flow State" (Chapter 7), and try to maintain the work-life balance that underlies the strategies of this book.

Advances in research conducted by NIH (the National Institutes of Health) and in the fields of neuropsychology and behavioral medicine over the last twenty years have proven that we can take control over our negative habits if we follow a series of steps. Their findings sup-

port *The Now Habit's* underlying principle of knowing when, where, and how to start a project, and how to replace procrastination with the healthy habits of producers. It seems that *The Now Habit* was ahead of its time.

I'm more confident than ever that *The Now Habit's* second edition can help a new generation of readers rid themselves of the procrastination habit and find that they are naturally motivated, productive people.

## PREFACE

In his book, *Creativity: a short and cheerful guide*, John Cleese of *Monty Python* and *Fawlty Towers* fame defines creativity as “new ways of thinking about things.” *The Now Habit* is a new way of thinking about procrastination and why we do it. It doesn’t blame you or call you lazy; it simply helps you get unstuck by shifting you to the effective self-talk of your “Leadership Brain.” By following *The Now Habit* steps, you will get started sooner and discover that your brain is excited to learn the creative work of going from not-knowing to knowing.

I whole heartily agree with Sir John Cleese and would add that guilt-free play is essential to working creatively, rapidly, and efficiently. This is especially true when you are working on boring tasks that you would rather avoid, put off, or delay for as long as possible – that is, those tasks on which you are most likely to procrastinate.

Since much of life involves inescapable boring – and, sometimes, painful – tasks such as completing income tax forms or undergoing surgery, it makes sense to learn how to limit the debilitating habit of procrastination and to move on to productivity, creativity, and improved health. Achieving success in school, business, or sports usually requires facing some difficult tasks. The sooner you start, the sooner you’ll be through them and be on to those tasks you enjoy. The sooner you start, the sooner you’ll discover that you – or, at least,

you and the creative part of your brain – are more creative than you thought.

Having worked with thousands of procrastinators, I've come to believe that procrastination is not the *cause* of our problems, but rather, an attempted solution. I define procrastination as an attempt to resolve issues such as low self-esteem, perfectionism, fear of failure and of success, indecisiveness, an imbalance between work and play, ineffective goal-setting, and negative concepts about work and self.

What we are really fighting isn't procrastination, but the things that make us use procrastination as a way of protecting ourselves from criticism, fear, and failure. And, with so many forms of distraction available since its first publication in 1989, *The Now Habit* system is more important than ever if we are to do the tasks that will improve your life.

To have a fighting chance against the dive-bombing distractions flying at us from the internet, texts, and cell phones, we need a clear mental focus on **When to start**, on **What to start**, **Even if the usual habits and distractions raise that siren calls**. Instead of fretting over "How will I ever finish all this work and do it perfectly so as to avoid criticism?" focus on **When** you can start for 5-15 minutes, on **What** part of the task, and be prepared with your list of **Even ifs** to swat aside the usual distracting suspects such as self-doubt, psychoanalysis, cravings, calls and texts. In 5-15 minutes, you may not have completed an important task but you will know more than you know now and your future self will appreciate that you got started.

Those who apply *The Now Habit* techniques and practice them can make massive changes in their productivity and life. It may take daily and weekly practice of improving your leadership self-talk, but within weeks most see great improvement. Note: if you slip back to old

self-talk e.g., “I have to finish all this work,” quickly get back to replacing “have to” with higher brain choice to follow your higher mission: “I am choosing to start for 15 minutes (thereby getting a fear-inoculation shot and moving from stuck to momentum) to help my future self.”

Note: you don’t “have to want to” do the work; you’re an adult, you can *choose* to do what is difficult, as you do when you start a puzzle, a crossword, or practice tennis.

Be careful to avoid asking “What’s wrong with me?” That’s a deep swamp. Keep your focus on the task and avoid psychoanalysis. Regardless of your emotional or psychological state, you’ll feel better developing the Now Habit of getting started.

Best wishes on your journey of discovery.

Neil Fiore

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# INTRODUCTION

Human nature has been sold short . . . [humans have] a higher nature which . . . includes the need for meaningful work, for responsibility, for creativeness, for being fair and just, for doing what is worthwhile and for preferring to do it well.

—ABRAHAM H. MASLOW

*EUPSYCHIAN MANAGEMENT*

**W**hether you are a professional, an entrepreneur, a middle manager, a writer, or a student who wants to overcome problems with procrastination—or if you simply want to be more efficient in completing complex and challenging projects—this program will help you get results. If you are organized in your larger work projects, but find that the small, essential tasks of everyday living get ignored, the Now Habit will help you set priorities for, start, and complete these tasks as well. If you are a professional whose busy schedule doesn't allow for leisure time, the Now Habit strategic program will legitimize guilt-free play while it improves the quality and efficiency of your work.

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If you suffer from extreme panic and blocks when confronted by pressure to perform, this book will show you how to overcome the initial terror so you can get started. It will teach you to use empowering inner dialogue that leads to responsible choices, while avoiding ambivalent messages such as “you should” and “you have to.”

The typical procrastinator completes most assignments on time, but the pressure of doing work at the last minute causes unnecessary anxiety and diminishes the quality of the end result. Procrastination is a problem that we all have in some areas of our lives, be it balancing the budget, filing a complicated legal brief, or painting the spare bedroom—anything we have delayed in favor of more pressing or pleasurable pursuits. We all have tasks and goals we attempt to delay—or totally escape.

### FROM PROCRASTINATOR TO PRODUCER

The procrastination habit catches people in a vicious cycle: get overwhelmed, feel pressured, fear failure, try harder, work longer, feel resentful, lose motivation, and then procrastinate. The cycle starts with the pressure of being overwhelmed and ends with an attempt to escape through procrastination. As long as you’re caught in the cycle, there is no escape. You can’t even enjoy the recuperative and creative benefits of guilt-free leisure time. Suddenly, any time spent on play—and even time spent on more enjoyable work—feels like an uneasy shirking from what you *should* be doing. By negatively affecting the way you think and feel about work, leisure, yourself, and your chances for success, procrastination becomes a part of your identity.

Instead, you can cultivate the Now Habit: the ability to put aside the fear of failure, the terror of feeling overwhelmed, and low self-esteem, and focus your mind on what you can start *now*. The skills

and strategies of the Now Habit program will let you think of yourself as a producer, feel like a producer, and act like a producer.

### A NEW DEFINITION OF PROCRASTINATION

Dozens of books offer pop-psychology theories about why people procrastinate. They encourage self-criticism by giving you additional negative labels, and they imply that you're lazy by making greater demands for discipline and organization. But there's a big difference between just diagnosing what's wrong and providing a system that enables you to correct it. People who have been procrastinating for years on major life goals are already pretty good at self-criticism. What they need are positive, practical techniques for getting beyond the stumbling blocks and on to achieving their goals.

Some books offer prosaic advice such as “break it into small pieces” or “set priorities.” You already know this. You've heard the advice, you have the knowledge—you may even have paid dearly for it. But this kind of advice isn't helpful because it misses the point: you would do these things if you could, if it were that simple.

People don't procrastinate just to be ornery or because they're irrational. They procrastinate because it makes sense, given how vulnerable they feel to criticism, failure, and their own perfectionism.

To overcome procrastination you need a positive attitude about the human spirit. This spirit's inherent motivation and curiosity has gotten us out of our caves and into condos, up from the comfort of crawling to the risks of standing and walking. The human spirit drives us to what Maslow calls our “need for meaningful work, for responsibility, and for creativeness.” If we can harness it, it will ease the fears that cause procrastination and open entirely new horizons for human achievement.