

## COLUMN

# Waiting for the motivation fairy

It's easy to give in to procrastination — but **Hugh Kearns** and **Maria Gardiner** offer some tips for getting your drive back.

*"I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they go by."*

— Douglas Adams

If you were trying to set up ideal conditions for procrastination, conducting a research project would provide them. Such projects tend to be large and time-consuming: completing a doctoral research project, for example, often takes three years or more. Deadlines and endpoints are often fuzzy and ill-defined. Then there's the reward structure: you can put in a lot of effort with little to no positive feedback along the way, and the rewards, if there are any, take a long time to come. Add to this the fact that scientists are often perfectionists with demanding, if not idealistic, expectations, and it is little wonder that procrastination is the most discussed topic in our graduate-student and researcher workshops. Many researchers simply take for granted that they are at the mercy of the forces of procrastination, doomed to increased stress levels and stretched deadlines. But there are simple strategies for pushing yourself to get engaged. The first is to recognize the patterns that you're falling into.

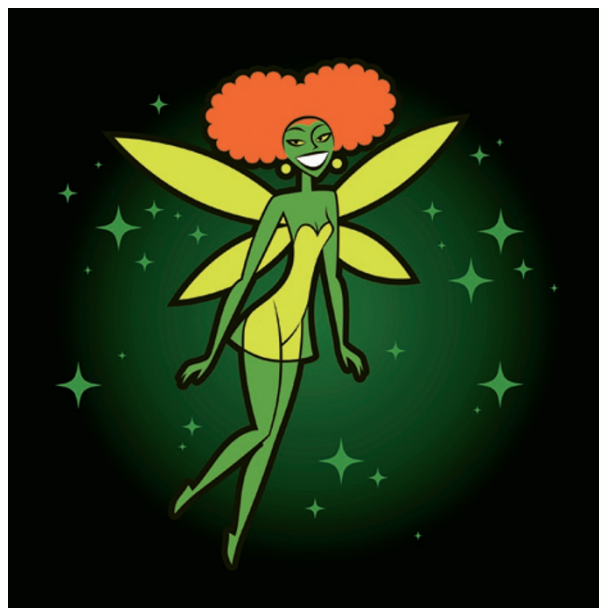
## ADVANCED DISPLACEMENT

Some procrastination activities are pretty obvious. There's the morning coffee break that creeps into lunchtime. Or watching videos on YouTube and sending them to all your friends. Or updating your Facebook status when you should be updating your lab book.

But most procrastination is far more subtle, and can even be mistaken for productive work. For example, you might try to track down that elusive reference, even though you've already got more than you will ever have time to read. Or you could start a new experiment instead of analysing the old one. Or take stock of the glassware in the lab. Or check your e-mail. These activities make it seem as though you're doing something

useful, and you may well be, but it's not the thing you should be doing right now.

So why is housekeeping, for example, so much fun when you're supposed to be working on your dissertation or a paper? It's a displacement activity, used to dispel the self-reproach or discomfort that we feel for not doing something else. Reading a novel or taking a nap



causes too much guilt. But have you ever, say, reorganized your folders to make it easier to find the files? It would speed up your writing, after all. Or perhaps you've diligently labelled all the cupboards in the lab to make it easier to find things.

Although these activities or excuses seem acceptable, their fatal flaw is that once they're over, you still haven't finished that article, started that experiment or written your dissertation. You probably have an increased sense of guilt because you're not making progress on your goal. And although you've found and read that reference, you still don't feel motivated to write. Sadly, while you were answering e-mails or counting the glassware, the motivation fairy didn't stop by and make

that difficult task look any more appealing. That's just not how motivation works.

Most people have a fundamental misunderstanding: we like to think that motivation leads to action, or, more simply, that when you feel like doing something, you'll do it. This model might work for things you enjoy doing, such as watching a film or going for a walk. But it's not particularly good for huge tasks with fuzzy deadlines. The problem is that you may never feel motivated to revise and resubmit that paper — at least not until a hard-and-fast deadline appears. You need a different model.

## MOTIVATION MOJO

Some psychology research shows that action leads to motivation, which in turn leads to more action. You have to start before you feel ready; then you'll feel more motivated, and then you'll take more action. You've probably had this experience yourself. You put off running an analysis for ages; eventually, you decide to do it, and once you start, you say to yourself, "This isn't as bad as I thought. Why not keep going while I'm at it?"

Of course, starting before you feel motivated is difficult. But certain strategies can directly tackle the conditions that lead to procrastination in the first place.

First, big projects need to be broken down into steps. Not just small steps, but tiny steps. Instead of saying you'll make the revisions to the paper — which probably seems overwhelming — the tiny step could be that you'll read the reviewer's comments or you'll make the first two changes. Second, you need to set a time or deadline by which to perform that tiny step. Saying you'll do it later or tomorrow isn't enough — the deadline needs to have an 'o'clock' attached to it. Third, you need to build in an immediate reward. If you finish reading the comments by your deadline at 10:00 a.m., you can allow yourself to have a coffee, a brief chat or a quick e-mail exchange. It's highly likely that once you start the task, your motivation will kick in and you'll find yourself wanting to spend longer at it.

So if the motivation fairy hasn't been stopping off at your lab or desk very frequently, perhaps you should give her a hand. The next time you catch yourself engaging in displacement activities, remember that there's a way to recover that elusive drive. Follow our three rules and watch your motivation grow. ■

**Hugh Kearns and Maria Gardiner** lecture and conduct research in psychology at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, and run workshops for graduate students and advisers (see [ithinkwell.com.au](http://ithinkwell.com.au)).