



Overcome procrastination: Enhancing emotion regulation skills reduce procrastination



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ABSTRACT

Procrastination is a widespread phenomenon that affects performance in various life domains including academic performance. Recently, it has been argued that procrastination can be conceptualized as a dysfunctional response to undesired affective states. Thus, we aimed to test the hypothesis that the availability of adaptive emotion regulation (ER) skills prevents procrastination.

In a first study, cross-sectional analyses indicated that ER skills and procrastination were associated and that these connections were mediated by the ability to tolerate aversive emotions. In a second study, cross lagged panel analyses showed that (1) the ability to modify aversive emotions reduced subsequent procrastination and that (2) procrastination affected the subsequent ability to tolerate aversive emotions. Finally, in a third study, a two-arm randomized control trial (RCT) was conducted. Results indicated that systematic training of the ER skills tolerate and modify aversive emotions reduced procrastination. Thus, in order to overcome procrastination, emotion-focused strategies should be considered.

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1. Introduction

Procrastination is a widespread and well-known phenomenon that refers to the voluntary delay of activities which are intended, despite the delay may have negative consequences (e.g., Klingsieck, 2013). Individuals differ in the extent they postpone tasks (Steel, 2007). Chronically engaging in problematic procrastination has been reported by about 15% of adults (Ferrari, Díaz-Morales, O'Callaghan, Díaz, & Argumedo, 2007; Harriott & Ferrari, 1996; Steel, 2007) and the prevalence is even higher in specific populations: Up to 50% of college students procrastinate consistently and problematically (Day, Mensink, & O'Sullivan, 2000). Numerous studies indicate that procrastination is associated with significant impairment of work and academic performance (e.g., Steel, 2007). Students often engage in activities like sleeping, reading, or watching TV instead of learning (Pychyl, Lee, Thibodeau, & Blunt, 2000). Moreover, procrastination reduces well-being (van Eerde, 2003), increases negative feelings such as shame or guilt (Fee & Tangney, 2000), increases symptoms of serious mental health problems such as depression (e.g., Strongman & Burt, 2000), and affects health behavior, such as delaying to seek proper care for health problems (e.g., Sirois, Melia-Gordon, & Pychyl, 2003; Stead, Shanahan, & Neufeld, 2010).

In an attempt to explain this widespread and potentially harmful phenomenon, several authors have proposed that negative emotions are an important antecedent of procrastination (Steel, 2007; Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001; Wohl, Pychyl, & Bennett, 2010). Evidence for this assumption comes from studies showing that people procrastinate more when they are sad or upset and that the subjective pleasantness of the distractor moderates the link between feeling upset and procrastination (Tice et al., 2001). Moreover, depressed affect, neuroticism, and lack of control over distressing situations have been found to be associated with procrastination (McCown, Johnson, & Petzel, 1989). Finally, it was shown, that the positive effects of self-forgiveness on procrastination were mediated by the reduction of negative affect (Wohl et al., 2010).

Thus, emotion regulation plays a critical role for understanding the self-regulatory failure of procrastination. Individuals postpone or avoid aversive task in order to gain short-term positive affect at the cost of long-term goals (Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). Regarding details of this process, Sirois and Pychyl (2013) suggest considering counterfactual thinking as an explanation of emotional misregulation that may promote procrastination. Counterfactual thinking means that individuals compare "... unfavourable outcomes that did occur in the past to possible better (upward, "if only" statements) or worse (downward, "at least" statements) outcomes that might have occurred" (Sirois & Pychyl, 2013, 119). In short, upward counterfactuals can cue aversive emotions (e.g. shame or guilt) that may initiate correcting future behavior (Boninger, Gleicher, & Strathman, 1994). Considering that aversive emotions like shame or guilt cause self-regulation to break down,

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upward counterfactuals may increase procrastination. On the contrary, downward counterfactuals improve actual feelings but leads to poorer future performance. Not only aversive emotional states cue procrastination, but also susceptibility to pleasurable temptations increase procrastination if individuals try to maximize pleasant feelings on coast of long-term goals (Dewitte & Schouwenburg, 2002, Tice & Bratslavsky, 2000). But ironically, engaging in enjoyable activities while procrastinating do not increase positive but negative affect because individuals feel guilty about their task avoidance (Pychyl et al., 2000).

As aversive affective states have been shown to cue procrastination by misregulation, it can be hypothesized that the ability to adaptively cope with aversive affective states reduces the risk of procrastination. According to Berking et al. (2008; 2014), ER skills include subcomponents such as: the ability (a) to be aware of one's emotions, (b) to identify and label emotions, (c) to correctly interpret emotions related to bodily sensations, (d) to understand the prompts of emotions, (e) to support one's own self in emotionally distressing situations, (f) to actively modify negative emotions in order to feel better, (g) to accept emotions, (h) to be resilient (in order to tolerate aversive emotions), (i) to confront emotionally distressing situations in order to attain important goals, (j) to support oneself (self-support), and (k) to modify aversive emotions (see Berking & Whitley, 2014 for details). Preliminary support for the assumption validity of this model comes from several studies in clinical and non-clinical populations (Berking & Znoj, 2008; Berking, Meier, & Wupperman, 2010; Berking et al., 2011; Berking et al., 2012; Berking, Ebert, Cuijpers, & Hofmann, 2013; Radkowski, McArdle, Bockting, & Berking, 2014; Wirtz, Hofmann, Rieper & Berking, 2013). Regarding all ER skills, in the heuristic framework of Berking and Znoj (2008) the ability to tolerate (resilience) and the ability to modify aversive emotions (modification) play key roles. Findings of Berking and colleagues support this; both abilities (resilience and modification) moderate the effects of the remaining ER skills (Berking et al., 2008).

There is ample evidence that shows how deficits in affect regulation skills are associated with various mental health problems (e.g., Berking & Lukas, 2015). Moreover, there is evidence that emotional self-regulation reduces procrastination (e.g., Blunt & Pychyl, 1998). It was shown that interventions which induct positive moods (Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, & Muraven, 2007) or interventions of self-affirmation (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009) enhance self-regulation capacity, which is needed to overcome procrastination. At last, recent research found that the association between health-related intention and actual engaging in health-related behavior was moderated by ER skills (Eckert, Ebert, Lehr, Sieland, Jazaieri & Berking, 2015). Although there is a body of evidence that emotional self-regulation is associated with procrastination, little is known about the association between the different abilities to adequately process and respond to one's feelings and procrastination. Thus, the aim of the present study is to clarify the role of emotion regulation skills in order to reduce the tendency of procrastination. With regard to the ER subcomponents, the framework of Berking and colleagues (e.g., Berking & Znoj, 2008) as well as findings of previous ER studies indicate that (1) the ability to tolerate and (2) the ability to modify aversive emotions mediate the relations between all other sub-skills and mental health (Berking et al., 2008). But with regard to procrastination, little is known about the role of these two sub-skills. Thus, we aim to clarify the roles of the ER skills resilience and modification in the interplay of ER skills. For this purpose we first tested the hypothesis that the availability of adaptive emotion regulation skills would be cross-sectionally associated with procrastination. In a second study, we clarified whether the prospective effects of ER skills would negatively predict subsequent procrastination. In a third study, we tested the hypothesis that a systematic training of adaptive ER skills would reduce procrastination in a randomized controlled trial of 83 employees of different professions.

2. Study 1

2.1. Materials and methods

2.1.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited among students from the Leuphana University in Lüneburg (Germany) during February 2011. They were asked to complete questionnaires about their study behavior in lectures. Consenting participants completed a paper-and-pen-based survey that included the questionnaires described in this section below. All procedures of the study were approved by the Institutional Review Board and complied with APA ethical standards.

The final sample consisted of 172 students (108 were women and 64 were men). Average age was 22.1 years ($SD = 3.0$). Regarding the sample's career choice, 86 participants (50%) studied economy, 84 (48.8%) studied to become teachers, one studied psychology (0.6%), and another studied education sciences (0.6%).

2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. Procrastination. Procrastination was measured by the Academic Procrastination State Inventory (APSI), which is a self-report instrument with 23 items that utilizes a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not* to 5 = *always*) to assess procrastination in academic domains (Schouwenburg, 1995; German version: Helmke & Schrader, 2000). Participants were asked to rate how often they engaged in the behavior stated by the items during the previous week. An example of an item is: "Gave up studying because you did not feel well". The inventory includes three subscales (*academic procrastination*, *fear of failure*, and *lack of motivation*). Relevant for the present study is the $APSI_{total}$ score that is computed as the average of all items. Internal consistency of the total score ($\alpha_{total} = 0.91$) was good.

2.1.2.2. Emotion regulation. ER skills were assessed using the *Emotion Regulation Skills Questionnaire (ERSQ)* (German version: Berking & Znoj, 2008). The ERSQ is a self-report instrument that includes 27 items and utilizes a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *almost always*) to assess adaptive emotion regulation skills (Berking & Znoj, 2008). The ERSQ assesses nine specific ER skills (awareness, sensations, clarity, understanding, acceptance of aversive emotions, resilience, self-support in distressing situations, readiness to confront distressing situations, and modification) with subscales composed of three items each.

The items are preceded by the stem, "Last week ...". Items include: "I paid attention to my feelings" (awareness); "my physical sensations were a good indication of how I was feeling" (sensations); "I was clear about what emotions I was experiencing" (clarity); "I was aware of why I felt the way I felt" (understanding); "I accepted my emotions" (acceptance of aversive emotions); "I felt I could cope with even intense negative feelings" (resilience); "I did what I had planned, even if it made me feel uncomfortable or anxious" (readiness to confront distressing situations); and "I was able to influence my negative feelings" (modification). Emotion regulation was successfully assessed by averaging all of the items and computing a total score (Berking & Znoj, 2008).

2.1.3. Data analyses

In a first step, we conducted four regression analyses, first on $APSI_{total}$, second on $APSI_{procrastination}$, third on $APSI_{fear\ of\ failure}$, and fourth on $APSI_{lack\ of\ motivation}$. We calculated the explained variance of all subscales and the standardized regression weights of each subscale.

In order to clarify the roles of the ER skills resilience and modification in the interplay of ER skills, we conducted mediating analyses. We investigated whether the association of each ER skill and procrastination is mediated by the Subscale $ERSQ_{resilience}$ or by $ERSQ_{modify}$. For these analyses we used the SPSS MACRO PROCESS (Hayes, 2013).

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