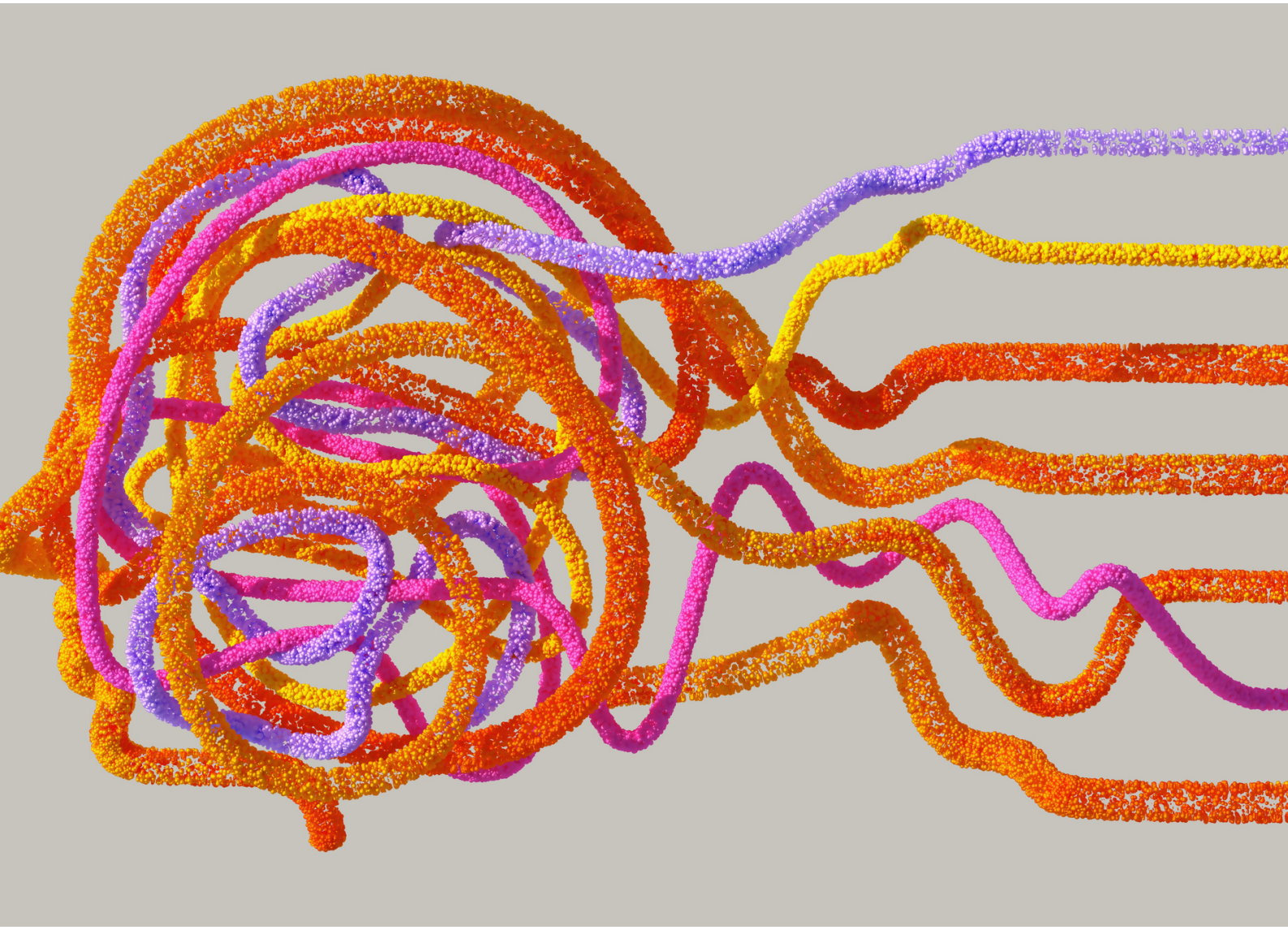

PROCRASTINATION IS-NOT-A-SIGN OF LAZINESS.

Learning is a journey that requires a healthy mind. Take breaks, breathe deeply, and embrace the process.

Cognitive Psychology / Fall 2023

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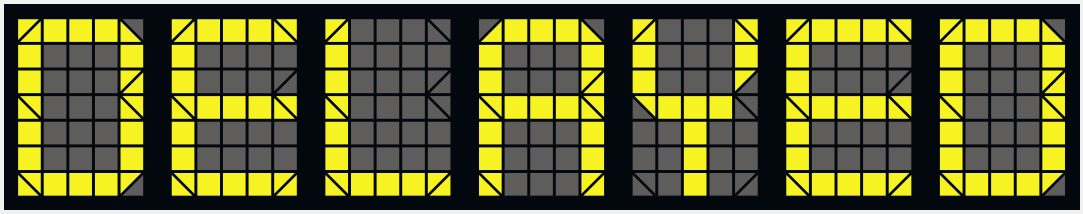
Mr Procrastinatus

In the snowy lands of Education City, where textbooks fly from the QF tram into the backpacks of unsuspecting students, there exists a peculiar creature known as Mr. Procrastinatus Collegius.

This elusive being has mastered the art of masquerading as a student in a perpetual state of leisure, turning simple tasks into mega sagas of avoidance and transforming deadlines to be more like suggestions. In this world, punctuality has become a myth told to scare freshmen, and the Netflix siren has become louder than the impending doom of an overdue paper.

Welcome to the Myth Busters magazine. Today, we are debunking the belief that academic procrastination is a sign of laziness.

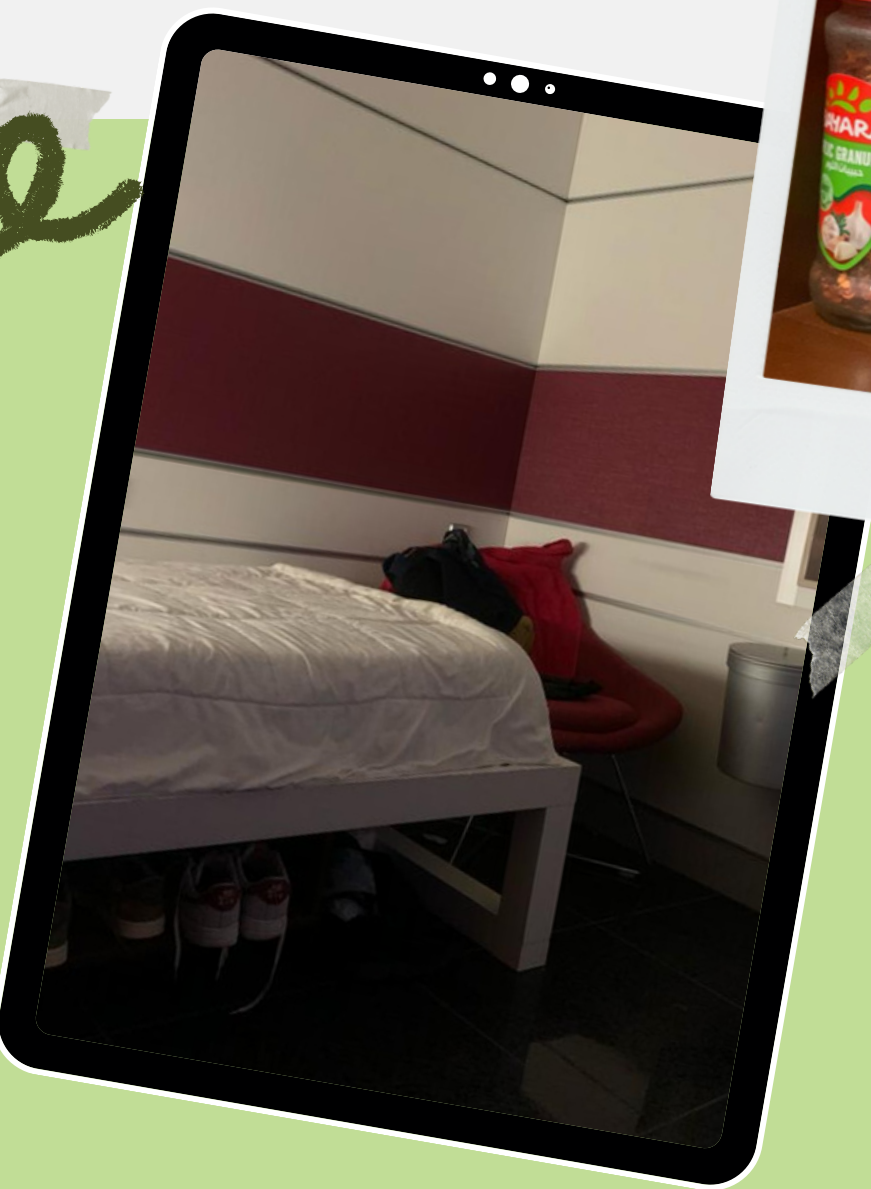
If you avoid your academic tasks and trade them for self-gratifying chores while knowing very well the grievous consequences of your actions, it means you are a procrastinator (could be), you deserve D's, and F's (probably you don't) and wait for it…you are a lazy student! (not really).



In psychology, procrastination refers to the voluntary delay of an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay (Zhang, W., Wang, X., &Feng, T. 2016). As students, most of us already harbor a dislike for the prospect of unending assignments. Rather than confronting these tasks, procrastination often serves as our defense mechanism.

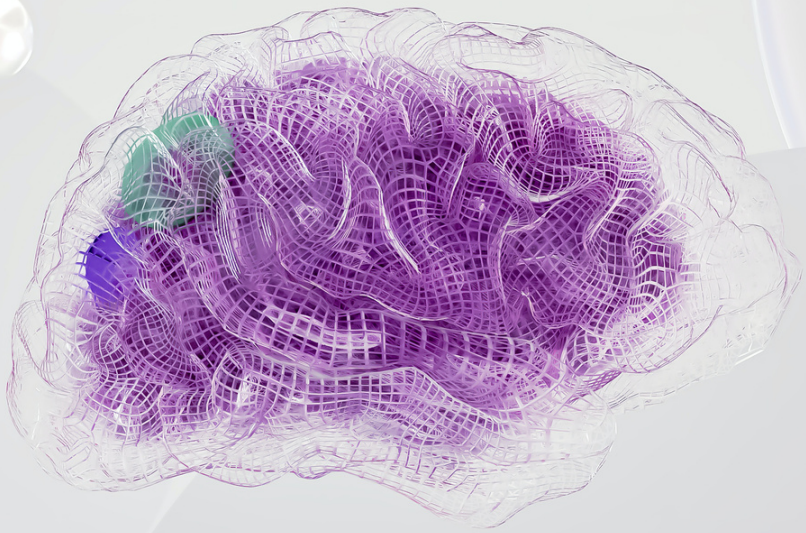
But who is this monster that entangles our once focused and driven brains turning us into helpless college kids battling existential crises?

“I prefer cleaning my entire room, doing my laundry, or even rearranging my spices just to avoid working on my paper,” says Mohammed Dayib, a master’s student at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Education City. “The problem is I feel terrible putting away these tasks for later. Regardless, I still can’t get the strength to shift my focus and work on my priority tasks.”

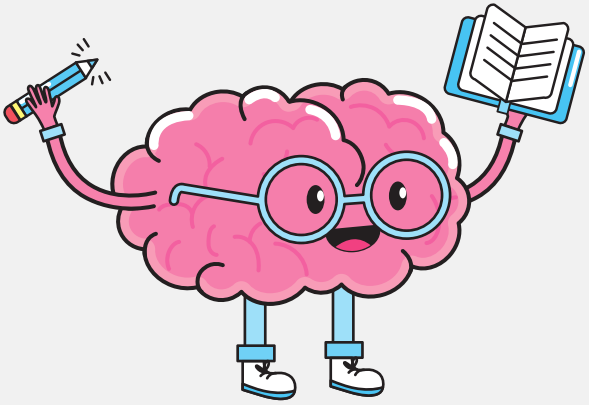


Above: Some images of organized spices and a tidy room representing Dayib’s preferred activities over working on his academic paper.

Is it fair to equate the prioritization of tasks like doing your laundry over working on assignments to laziness?



Objectively, it must have taken Dayib quite some effort to complete these tasks. Whether it is cleaning his room or doing laundry, it would be unfair to correlate his delay for working on his paper to laziness or poor time management. These activities were seemingly more rewarding and pleasurable to Dayib than completing his academic paper.



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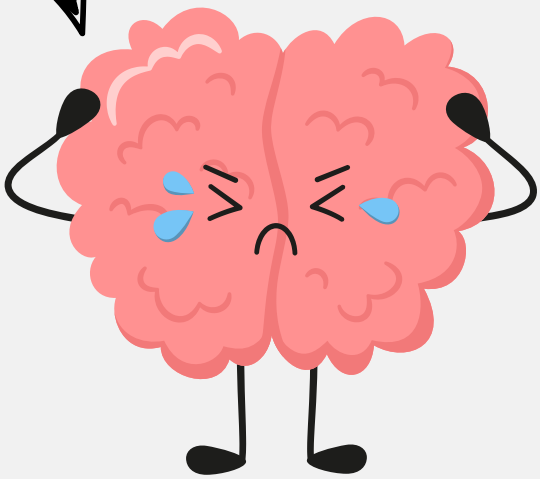


Operant conditioning: involves the use of rewards or punishments to encourage or discourage certain behaviors, ultimately influencing an individual's likelihood of repeating those behaviors in the future.

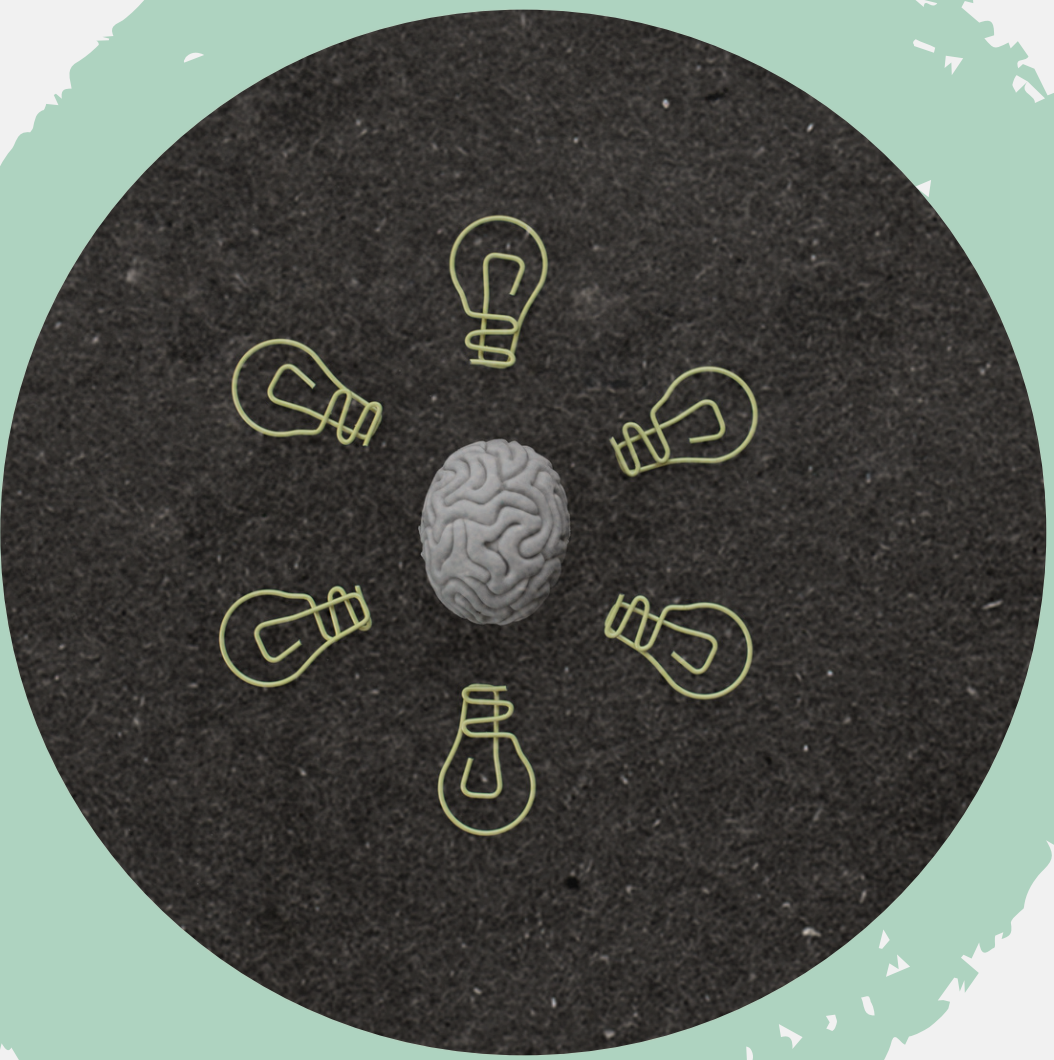
The momentary relief we feel when we procrastinate could be reinforced if we keep rewarding ourselves with an immediate gift in the form of relief for putting off a task. From basic behaviorism, replacing the tasks we dread with pleasurable activities allows operant conditioning to occur. Operant conditioning reinforces our rewarding activities and discourages the tasks we dread, resulting in a chronic cycle of procrastination.

For instance, scrolling through Tik Tok or playing computer games could be very rewarding and we might repeat these relief-offering behaviors ultimately turning them into our go to activities at the expense of our responsibilities.

How often do you feel terrible for not completing your planned tasks? Does feeling terrible make you procrastinate even further? If that's you, then you could be susceptible to procrastinatory cognitions. In this state, the ruminative and self-blaming thoughts we initially experience after procrastination exacerbate our distress and impel us to procrastinate further.

The negative feelings that follow procrastination are a result of our self-awareness. Students like Dayib are aware that delaying their tasks will only yield negative results, but regardless, they delay these tasks against their better judgment.

This irrational engagement in tasks that we are aware will ultimately produce negative consequences can be attributed to negative moods, according to a study on procrastination and the priority of short-term mood regulation. Therefore, it is likely that the inability to manage negative moods around a task compels students to be enchanted by the immediate urgency to address these moods by enganging in activities that evoke positive moods which eventually leads to procrastination (Sirois, F., & Pychyl, T., 2013).



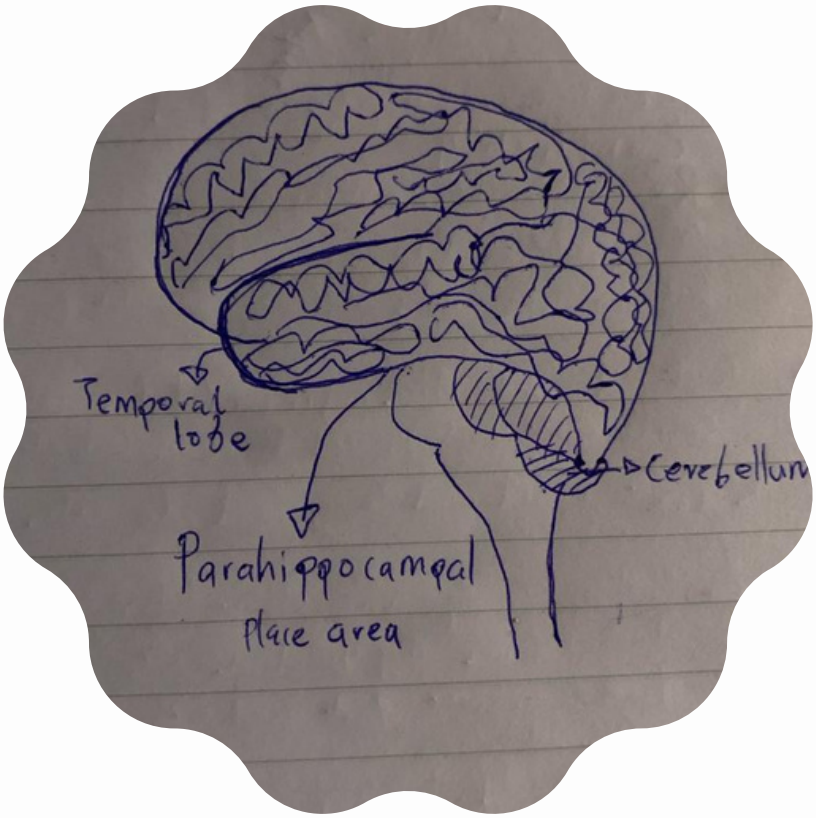
But what really goes on in our brains to permeate the delay of tasks against our will?

In unraveling the intricate workings of procrastination within the brain, we examine one study that employs a resting state fMRI that offers an elaborate analysis of the underpinning neural substrates that subserve procrastination. A resting state fMRI is an imaging technique that observes intrinsic brain activity at rest. According to the study, behavioral procrastination yielded a correlation to some areas of our brains (ventral medial prefrontal cortex – vmPFC and parahippocampal cortex – PHC).

An fMRI machine for brain imaging

Procrastination
X
fMRI

These results suggest that, unlike the popular belief that procrastination is a sign of laziness, the positive correlations with brain activity in the PHC and vmPFC might suggest procrastination could be linked to a more complex cognitive process, indicating that individuals engaging in procrastination might be employing certain cognitive functions associated with the PHC and vmPFC. Rather than being a mere manifestation of laziness, these findings imply a deeper neural involvement in the decision-making or the emotional aspects of task delay.

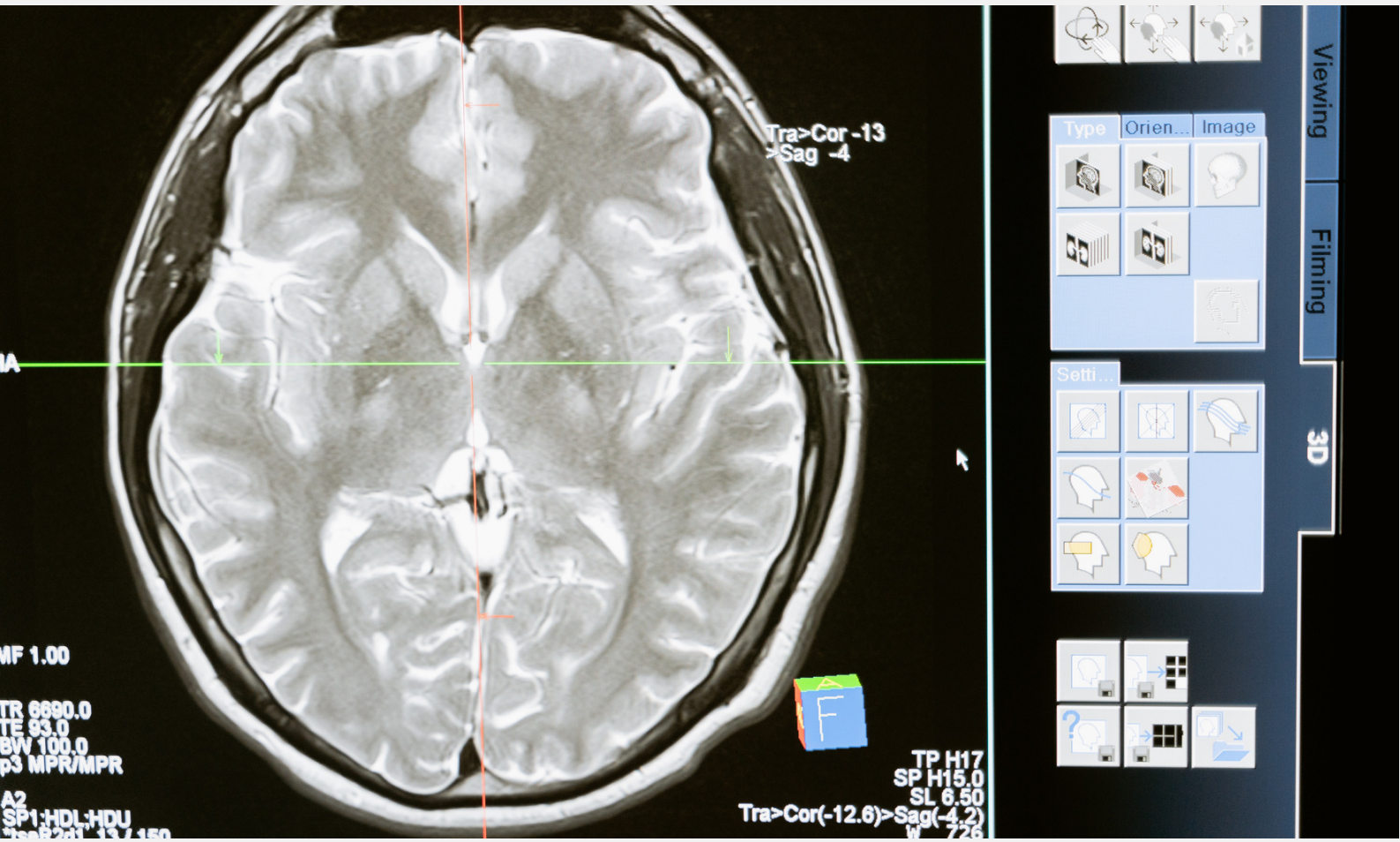


The parahippocampal cortex (shown on the left) is a brain region located in the medial temporal lobe. It is closely associated with memory formation, spatial processing that helps you navigate and form mental maps of the environment, and emotional processing.

Previous studies have demonstrated an engagement of the PHC in the processing of episodic memory and emotional stimuli. Cumulative evidence has shown that episodic future thinking is associated with procrastination (Zhang, W., Wang, X., &Feng, T. 2016).

By associating the cognitive aspects of episodic future thinking with the PHC, these findings imply that when the imagination of unfavorable outcomes may play a role in influencing procrastinatory behavior, further highlighting the complex interplay between cognitive processes and procrastination tendencies.

Episodic memory: This is the memory of everyday events that can be explicitly stated. It is the collection of past personal experiences that occurred at particular times and places

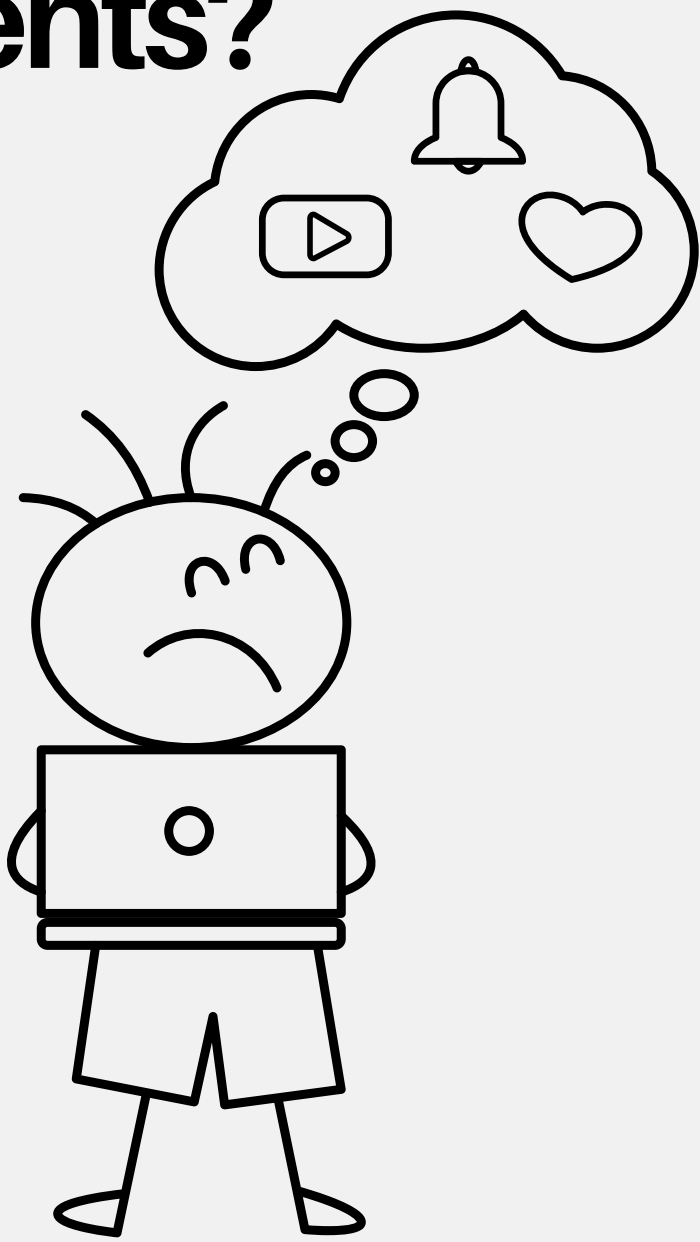


An illustration of a brain image under an fMRI

We would be inclined to delay working on an academic paper in which we anticipate poor grades over concerns about our abilities, leading to heightened anxiety and a negative emotional response. This anticipation of poor grades may act as a psychological barrier, triggering procrastination as a coping mechanism to avoid the perceived stress associated with potential failure.

However, the imagination of a negative future might not be the only cause of procrastination. We can simply argue that correlation does not necessarily imply causation in this case. Albeit, it is apparent that procrastination is a complex phenomenon that transcends being lazy , not feeling up to it or just being a poor time manager.

What often distracts you from your assignments?



For students, it is proven that distractors such as pervasive access to social media and technology in general foster self-regulatory challenges (Meier, A., Reinecke, L., & Meltzer, C. E. 2016).

There is enough evidence to support the belief that technology has augmented procrastination among college students. However, there is much more to decode about procrastination, its prevalence among students, its role in academic achievements, and its variance in type-specific tasks. It is strongly advised that you seek assistance whenever you feel overwhelmed as the first step towards overcoming your challenges.

Is it within our capacity to triumph over procrastination?

To subdue procrastination, we must get to the root cause of this elusive creature. Unfortunately, as of yet, there is no magic pill that we can take to beat procrastination. Additionally, even the most popularly suggested solutions, like downloading time management applications or learning new time-management strategies, have at times fallen through in averting or countering procrastination.

But...

Start before you feel ready; action precedes motivation, and momentum defeats procrastination.

LEVERAGING
Healthier ways

According to experts, some healthier ways to overcome procrastination include managing the emotions that typically trigger procrastination. This may involve cultivating curiosity by bringing your attention to the sensations that elicit our temptation to procrastinate. (Lieberman, C. 2019). Thinking about where you feel this sensation in your body, what it reminds you of, or what happens to the thought of procrastinating as you observe it can offer you a better perspective on mitigating those emotions.

Making your temptations and distractions more inconvenient can significantly boost your efforts towards preventing procrastination as it adds friction to your procrastination cycle. If social media is your immediate reward, deleting the applications or leaving your phone behind when going to work can make these immediate rewards less accessible and less tempting. Conversely, making your priority tasks more manageable by removing any potential obstacles can significantly propel you towards getting those tasks done.

I hope we can agree that procrastination is not a sign of laziness; rather, it often stems from a complex interplay of psychological, emotional, and cognitive factors. Understanding and addressing the root causes of procrastination can lead to more effective strategies for enhancing productivity and time management.

THE END

CITATIONS

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