

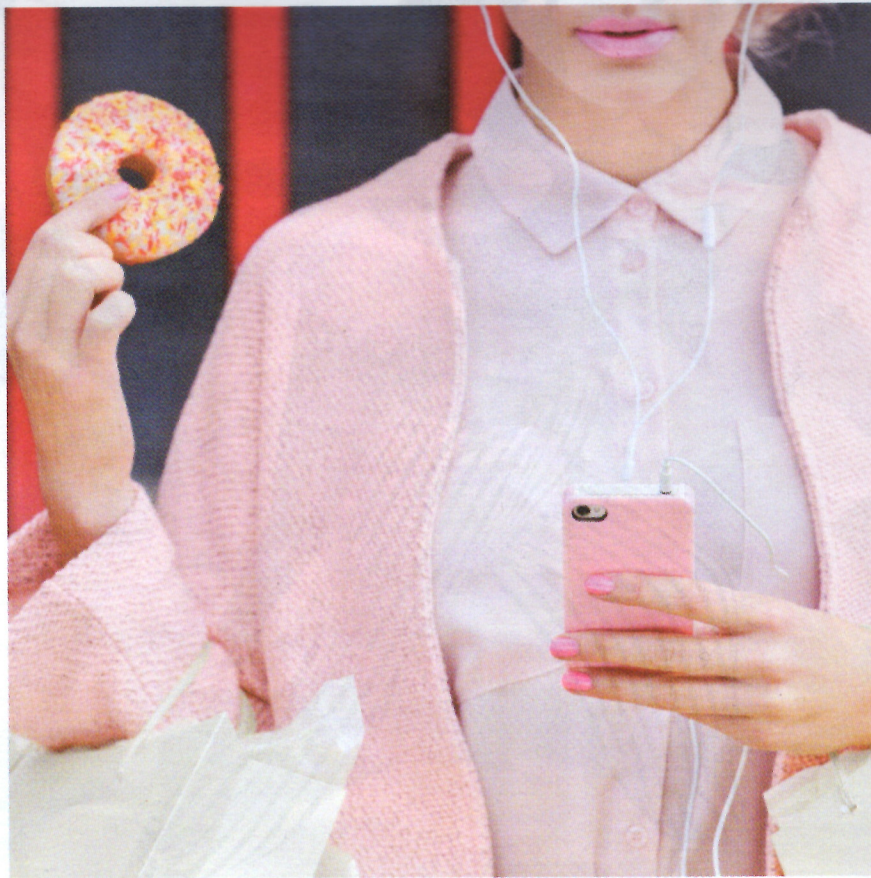
Most of us are familiar with the fine art of procrastination – the dilly-dallying, the time-wasting and the way ironing your underpants suddenly becomes imperative when you've got a deadline looming. Procrastination has been linked with low self-regulation and increased stress, but recent research has coined a new phenomenon, thought to be the opposite of procrastination, with its own problems: pre-crastination.

Pre-crastination is the tendency to begin or to finish tasks as soon as possible.

A study published in the journal *Psychological Science* in 2014 found striking evidence of pre-crastination among college students. Students were asked to pick one of two empty buckets placed at different points along a walkway and carry whichever bucket seemed easier to take to the end. Surprisingly, most students chose the bucket nearest to the starting point, carrying it further than if they had selected the bucket closer to the end. Even when the buckets had more than three kilograms of weights in them, students still chose the bucket nearest to them.

The majority of participants said they wanted to get the task done as soon as they could, even though picking up the closest bucket didn't actually lead to them completing the task sooner. "Holding a goal in mind loads working memory ... if there is a way to reduce working memory load, people will do so," wrote the study's authors. "The urge to reduce the working memory load may be so great that people are willing to expend extra physical effort."

Reducing the burden on memory and therefore lightening our mental load is just one of the reasons people pre-crastinate, says John Malouff, associate professor of psychology at the University of New England. Other motivations for



early warning

Rushing through your to-do list might not be as productive as you think, writes Lindy Alexander.

pre-crastinating include "reducing the chance of forgetting, demonstrating zeal to someone [such as] a work supervisor, using time efficiently and avoiding stress feelings that can arise if problems occur near the task due date," he says.

Pre-crastinating to reduce overwhelming anxiety about completing a task or about completing it well enough is maladaptive, says Malouff, and is common in people with obsessive-compulsive personality disorders. "The OCD drive to complete tasks immediately can make a person feel anxious much of the time and can make the person behaviourally rigid and less than pleasant," he adds.

There's no doubt that completing a task, no matter how small, is inherently rewarding for most of us and it makes sense that we feel industrious when things get done quickly. However, the rush to get tasks done sooner rather than later may end up being less productive than we think.

People who receive emails or text messages and hit reply before they've worked out what they are going to say

are likely to send off ill-considered responses. Some of us make impulsive decisions about household items that we need to buy but don't want to spend time researching. If we leap before we look, we run the risk of having to repeat tasks that we didn't do properly the first time.

Getting things off our to-do list seems great on the surface, but can lead to a lack of innovation and missed depth, says change and leadership specialist Michelle Landy.

"Pre-crastination certainly makes us get through a lot on our to-do list, but when it becomes our approach to everything we do, the problems soon reveal themselves," she says.

Instead of racing to complete tasks, people should assess how much thought or attention a certain job needs, says Landy. There is, she says, a fruitful space between blindly diving in and not starting at all. "There is a wonderful zone of productivity and achievement that sits in the middle of pre- and procrastination," she says. "This is what I call 'mindful productivity' – the art of

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