Procrastination, stress and self-regulation: eventually is not a day of the week

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Abstract

Procrastination is a common academic problem cited by post-secondary students and has implications for their mental, physical, social and academic wellbeing. Past research attributes procrastination to issues with self-control, impulsivity, or perfectionism. In the current study, we explored procrastination in terms of a Yerkes-Dobson inverted-U state-stress response. Accordingly, procrastination may reflect lower productivity when students are either too low or too high in state-stress. A sample of 342 undergraduate students completed measures of procrastination, state-anxiety, and self-regulation. A factor analysis identified three factors contributing to the reasons for procrastination. These factors were used as the basis to create three procrastination groups: social procrastinators (lower stress, focused on others; n=47); self-doubting (high stress, concerned about their ability, n=38); and low-energy (moderate stress, but experiencing lethargy/avoidance behaviors, n=37). Results found that while the low-energy group did not report higher than average levels of stress, they cited avoidance of friend/family, extracurricular activities, and sleeping too much; behaviors indicative of toxic, long-term stress. Low-energy procrastinators reported the highest prevalence of procrastination relative to the moderate rates cited by self-doubting and social procrastinators, however; only the low-energy and self-doubting procrastinators see this behavior as problematic. The results are interpreted in terms of Thayer’s energy and tension matrix, where procrastination may increase tension and productivity for some, whereas procrastination for others may reflect an ‘overstressed’ state. These findings suggest that academic interventions for procrastination should address the specific stress states and needs of the various types of procrastinators.

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