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Behavior Column

Motivating by deadlines

Procrastination is something difficult to understand. How can it be so detrimental, yet at the same time so common? It goes beyond simple laziness; our society teaches that results are more important than the process.

I learned the finer points of procrastination working on my high school newspaper staff. If anyone were to have experience with deadlines and pressure it would be a newspaper writer or editor. Journalists must be the model students when it came to responsibility and punctuality right? Wrong.

We always had a deadline. New students would make an effort the first few months to be on time. After that it was standard to procrastinate. You learned to always live with deadlines. We would joke around and sit in the break room until printing day. Then it was chaos. Skipping our other classes we would type and print frantically, quote everyone that stepped into the classroom or happened to walk by the door, and there was always someone crying. There was always something more to research, write, and edit. The idea that was taught was to worry about it last minute so you could forget it all day.

Last Friday I had a research paper due in my motivational psychology class. I knew all semester what was expected. I knew the deadline and planned accordingly. By that I mean I would write it mostly the day of. We were to email it to him by 5 pm.

Friday came and after class I went over to a friend's house to work on the paper. They were working on the siding on their home and had to disconnect the power. I wasn't nervous. I had a lot of it written and I had a good idea of the direction I wanted it to go. I decided to wait for the power to come back on.

A couple of hours went by and no power. I leisurely played *Phase 10* seemingly not affected by my imposing deadline. It was 3:30 and I hadn't started. By then I knew I had to do something. I drove up to campus and found a computer. I checked my email and found that an internship application deadline was today, so I took time and filled out the application. I now had an hour to write the paper.

I frantically tried to put down all of my thoughts and edit the paper properly, as I had done on my high school newspaper staff. I emailed it by 5:30. Thirty minutes passed deadline. I received a 30% grade reduction for turning it in late.

Life is often a stressful. Stress is the body's way of motivating people to action. The body was never meant to be in a constant state of being stressed. Rather than dealing with stress in healthy ways, high school students are learning to shut off that sense of urgency. They learn it's acceptable to stress out a lot for a moment rather than worry a little over time.

Society focuses on results over process. Business, school, or health, we look at results. Profit margins and grades are our indication of success. How much damage has been done to improper reporting and faulty research? Mistakes are made everyday because of the pressure of a deadline. Somewhere our focus is wrong.

We need to focus and teach more about the benefit of learning the process. It's through the process of writing, researching, and editing that real skills and character grow. I'll be the first to admit that it is difficult to let go of strict results and find the joy in the process. The benefit to this is that when you focus on the process you actually have better results over time.

It's ironic that my paper on motivational psychology was late due to my lack of motivation. It's sad that the students of my high school looked to me as a credible source of news. These experiences show me I still have a long way to go. I'm still teaching myself to find the joy in the process. We all need to learn to look at things differently and make an effort to support the learning process, rather than just the outcome.