

4 Procrastination Triggers and How to Spot Them



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4 Procrastination Triggers and How to Spot Them

"Life is a mirror and will reflect back to the thinker what he thinks into it" – Ernest Holmes



Procrastination Triggers — we all have them. Words and phrases we habitually use that stop us from doing the things we think we want to do. In fact, these words are so habitual that in most cases, we're completely unaware that we're even thinking or saying them.

Consider the little throwaway words we use when we're talking to someone. We go, "Um..." or "Ah..." or "Y'know..." or "Like...". These may be annoying for the listener, but they're innocuous. They act like subconscious brakes so our thoughts can catch up with our conversation. These sounds create a small mental space for intentional communication. It's like a pause while we try to come up with a solution — the exact right expression of an idea.

But Procrastination Triggers are different. They're more insidious — an internal defence mechanism. We use these words and phrases to convince others and fool ourselves that we're accomplishing something when in fact, we're avoiding an issue, a challenge, a problem, a project, or some other thing that, for whatever reason, our subconscious thinks is dangerous.

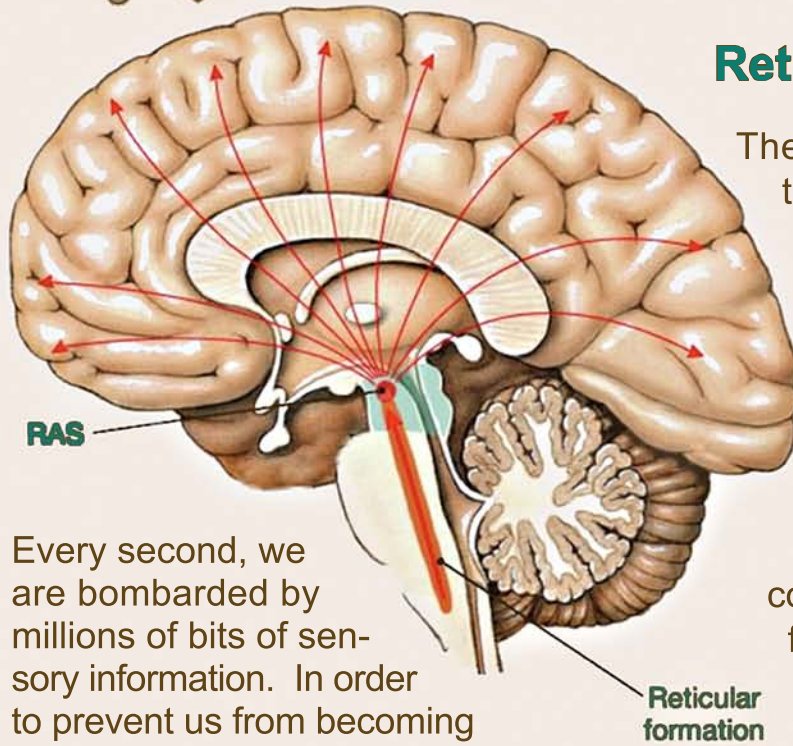
How often have you said you "can't afford" something, or you tell yourself and others, "I'll get to it someday", or "I'm going to do that thing", but you never do, because something always comes up to sabotage your plans.

Years ago, I took a course on the Law of Attraction and one of the main precepts of the course was replacing negative words with positive affirmations. Seems sensible, right? If you want to get rid of negative emotions, don't give them a voice or outlet. Replace them with positive thoughts and emotions.

But I never understood the point of this practice, because the affirmations always sounded as if I was lying to myself. I simply couldn't make myself believe these insanely upbeat statements that directly contradicted what I just *knew* was true. "Wealth flows to me in abundance" was patently ridiculous when I couldn't pay the bills, I was out of food and the unemployment cheque wasn't due for another two weeks.

In the years since, I've learned a good deal more about how the brain works, in particular, that part of the brain called the Reticular Activating System or RAS for short.

Reticular Activating System



The RAS is a small part of the brain that starts close to the top of the spinal column and extends upwards around two inches. Its diameter is a bit bigger than a pencil, about the size of your little finger. All of your senses (except smell, which goes to our brain's emotional centre) are wired directly to this bundle of neurons which controls sleep and waking, as well as fight-or-flight responses. It's also the psychological basis for the Law of Attraction.

Every second, we are bombarded by millions of bits of sensory information. In order to prevent us from becoming overloaded, the RAS acts like a filter and is responsible for focusing only on the information that's relevant to the prefrontal cortex, the conscious part of the brain. It decides what's important and what can safely be ignored. The key word here is "safely".

Stop for a moment and listen to all the sounds around you. There are probably a lot more of them that you weren't even aware of until you stopped to take note.

Now do the same with sight. How many thousands of colours, objects and shapes can you see when you look around? If you had to be consciously aware of all of this, all the time, your sensory systems would be completely overwhelmed. The RAS knows this and only shows you what you need to know when you need to know it.

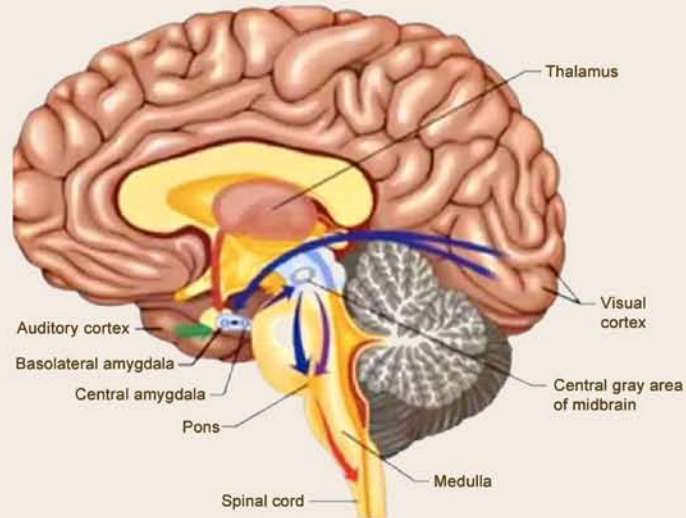
When you first put your attention on something, all of a sudden you find it all over the place — sights, sounds objects, experiences. It's the basis of serendipity, those coincidental meetings or happenings that occur at the perfect time, but it's not because something new suddenly showed up, but because it was there all along and it just didn't register because the RAS hadn't been alerted to its importance.

For example, let's say you want to buy a new car, so you look at all the options and decide on a blue Ford Escape. Even though you never noticed before, suddenly you're seeing Ford Escapes and blue cars everywhere. This is because the RAS knows that this information is relevant and important to you so it allows it through your filter. Without this filter, you'd have to sort through millions of pieces of data per second, trying to decide what was important and what wasn't. It's a survival mechanism we've evolved to keep us from sensory overload.

The Amygdala

Amygdala Hijacking

- **The stimulus goes directly to the thalamus and it then goes right to the amygdala before a signal reaches the neocortex to process.**
- **This survival mechanism lets us react to things before the rational brain has time to mull things over.**



There's another part of the brain called the amygdala, sometimes called the "lizard brain". This is the part whose job it is to keep us safe. Whenever it perceives anything that's different, new or out of the ordinary, it goes on high alert, creating a cascade of fear-inducing physical reactions — butterflies in the stomach, fight-or-flight reactions, nervous sweat, all of which result in behaviours meant to keep us alert to the danger of being eaten by imaginary lions. The result is avoidance and procrastination. We find other things to do, other ways of behaving which don't trigger this automatic fear response.

Most of the time, our responses are so subtle that we're not even aware that we're behaving counter-productively until after the so-called "danger" is past. We get to the end of a day and then wonder where the time went. Hey, we were busy, weren't we? We got things done. But they weren't what we said we'd do. And the reason is that what our conscious mind thought was a good idea was something our lizard brain saw as new, different and therefore dangerous, so it derailed our plans through a carefully-managed and understated campaign of fear, boredom, disinterest or bad moods — we procrastinate most when we're in a funk and think we can improve it with something fun or diverting.

Sometimes the physical reactions which accompany these avoidance behaviours can become so extreme that they make us ill. Chronic stress caused by the amygdala's need to shield us from danger can damage the immune system, leading to serious illness, even death. Often the root source of a serious illness is found to be a defence mechanism against an imagined threat — migraine to avoid a job you hate, throwing up from stage fright, even cancers have been found to have a mental/emotional basis, which, when identified, can be dealt with.

So, back to our procrastination triggers...

What are the kinds of things this pesky lizard brain does to sabotage us and how can we discover them?

There are clues to the sneaky ways the amygdala misdirects our actions, and these can be found in the words we say — our self-talk and our conversations with others.

How often do you really hear the words in your head? How often do you take them out and examine them? If you meditate or journal, write **Morning Pages** or hire a life coach or therapist, perhaps you have a clearer idea than most, of your own deeply-held beliefs and values, (no matter how mistaken they may be), but most of us are unaware of just how often we verbally shoot ourselves in the foot.



To be sure, most of these words in regular conversation are innocuous. It's when we use them to describe ourselves and our behaviour that they become instruments of self-sabotage. You hear it in people's speech all the time (and I'm just as guilty of this as anyone else).

Here are some examples:

- You receive a compliment and instead of simply saying "Thank you", as if you actually deserve such a comment, you shrug it off — "Oh, this old thing?"
- "I don't understand math." (My own frequent complaint about numbers.)
- "I hate...(spiders, heights, winter, black people, white people, indigenous people, young people, old people, cats, purple, coffee, or whatever is your current prejudice).
- "President Trump is an idiot," or, "President Trump is a saviour," along with all the accompanying emotional load that either of these statements holds for you.
- "That (opinion, idea, concept) is just stupid."
- "I can't (do something) because..."
- "I could never..."

These triggers always come from our core identity and they tend to be of two types.

1. They're extreme and over the top, the opinions of a very young person or child, formed when we were too young to cope with situations we didn't understand and couldn't control, or...

2. They're words and phrases focused on explaining why we can't get what we want. In this way, we can avoid doing what we know we must do in order to achieve what we want to achieve, because the thought of getting there might not be fun, easy or immediately achievable. The keyword here is "thought", because every action is preceded by a thought, so if the thought is scary, the action will be blocked or deflected.

Most of the time, these words are simply part of normal conversation, but they can be insidious when they masquerade as innocent in order to conceal our underlying fears and other negative emotions. Then they become instruments of self-sabotage, and they do it so subtly that we never notice. This is why it's so difficult to spot them.

In the vast majority of cases, the trigger words we say are meant to reassure ourselves and others that it's not our fault, that once the roadblock is removed, we'll definitely achieve success. Most procrastination triggers are excuses, rationalizations, justifications or expressions of a limiting belief, but they're all attempts by the amygdala to steer us off-course, resulting in a continuing cycle of self-sabotage.

Here's a list of some of the most common Procrastination Trigger Words and Phrases:

When, Whenever

Soon, Once or Eventually

Never

Always

Forever

If or If only

Only

However, Because

Even though

Yet

Just about, Nearly, Almost

I want to, I'm about to, I will or I'm gonna / going to (do something)

Should or Ought to

Someday or One Day

Until

But or Yeah, but

In the next section we'll cover where these words fit into the four main types of triggers, as well as some of the emotional and behavioural ramifications of these words and how they work to stop you from doing the things you want to do.

The Four Categories

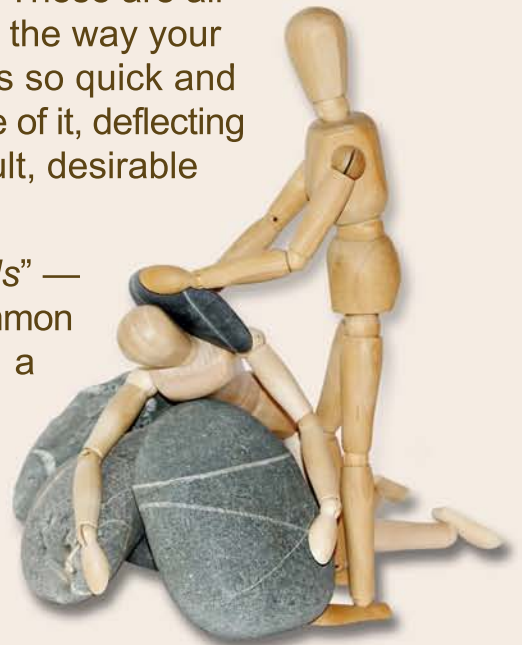
1. Futurecasting
2. Stopping Words
3. Shoulds / Obligations
4. Identity-based / All-or-Nothing



You'll notice that most of the words in the list on the previous page are either "*Futurecasting*" or "*Stopping Words*". By this, I mean they're either words that project the desired outcome into the future, where it's safely out of reach, like "Until" or "Yet", or they're words that stop you from taking the thought (and therefore the action) any further, such as "But", or "Because". These are all

indicators of thwarted desire, and as such, are clues to the way your lizard brain is sabotaging your efforts to get ahead. It's so quick and so subtle, it does this before you can even become aware of it, deflecting you before you can choose the more dangerous, difficult, desirable (and more mature) path.

Then there are the trigger words that I call the "*Shoulds*" — words and phrases based on *Obligation*. This is very common in people-pleasers, those men and women who feel a need to help others, often to their own detriment. When asked for a favour, they are unable to say "No", even when they don't want to do what they've been asked to do. They agree, because by doing so, they may accrue some reciprocal obligation in the form of approval, status or protection. As children, we learn that it's easier to give in than to protest, because it means continued protection and safety within the family. The alternative might be punishment or exile.



The fourth type of procrastination trigger comes from our core identity — the truth about who we are, deep down. They indicate a rigid, all-or-nothing, black-and-white view of the situation which doesn't allow any wiggle room for grey areas or creative innovation. The most common of this type of trigger words are: "I am", "I'm not", "Always" or "Never". For example: "I'm an introvert". "I'm always late." "I'll never learn." Until we can begin to recognize these statements and question their veracity, we can't change them.



Let's take a closer look at some of the most common procrastination triggers. No doubt, once you start looking, you'll discover you're guilty of using a few of your own.

Futurecasting



This particular type of procrastination trigger is a big one for those who say, "I never finish anything." Something else, something that's forever beyond your control, has to happen first. This is a common way to deflect responsibility. You can't be blamed. It's not your fault, right?

- **When, whenever, soon, once or eventually:** These words indicate futurecasting — something scary or overwhelming is stopping you and you'll only be able to move forward "**once**" that roadblock is magically removed. Also indicates all-or-nothing, with little to no room for creative alternatives. Variations of this phrase could be, "**as soon as**", "**not before**", "**by the time**", and so on.

Example: I'll start on the bathroom renovation "**when**" I get a raise (or a loan or an inheritance, or some other circumstance beyond your control). But the money's never there, so the job doesn't get done.

- **Until:** This is a big one for me personally. I've learned to watch for the word "**until**" in my thoughts and speech, because it usually indicates that subconsciously I've put the brakes on an ambition. I was deaf and blind to this trigger word before two different people I trust pointed it out to me so I could recognize it for myself.

Example: "I can't do this **until** I've done that," or "It's never gonna happen **until** I can afford it."

Futurecasting



- **If or if only:** This is wishful thinking. The situation is predicated on something else happening first, or an entirely different set of circumstances which would allow the desired outcome to take place. Similar to “*until*”. This phrase provides safety, since there isn’t anything to be done, so there’s no point in trying.

Example: “**If only** there were something I could do.”

- **Yet:** Often used as an unstated promise of future action, especially when you’re challenged for not having accomplished something.

Example: “No, it’s not done **yet**. I’ll get to it **eventually**.” (“Eventually” is another powerful futurecasting clue.)

- **Just About, Nearly or Almost:** Often used when you haven’t even started, these have the added advantage of helping to convince yourself and others that you’re actually working on the project. Sometimes it’s even true.

Example: “It’s **nearly** finished. But first, I have to...”

- **I want to, I’d like to, I’m about to, I will or I’m gonna/going to** — Unless you’ve actually set an intention and committed to it, these phrases usually indicate a “someday” wish — some goal or project that would be nice to have, but that you haven’t actually begun to act upon. These are often bucket list goals.

Example: “I’m **gonna** write a novel.” “I **want to** go to Italy.” These are “someday” goals which are an expression of our suppressed desires and help us define our own self-image. They’re so big, scary and overwhelming, it’s easier never to start than to confront the fear and overcome the difficulties of making them come true.

Someday or One Day: These are the most overtly futurecasting trigger words, because they acknowledge that they haven’t happened yet and aren’t happening now, but maybe they will happen. You just have no idea when or if they will. They indicate a dream, rather than a plan.

Example: “**One day**, I’d like to get my Master’s degree.”

Stopping Words



Because: When used as a rejection of an idea or suggestion, this word indicates a justification, an excuse or rationalization for maintaining the status quo, keeping you safe, unchanging.

Example: “I can’t do that because (I don’t know how, I’m not physically able, I’m too old, I’m too dumb, etc.)”

Even though: As a futurecasting trigger phrase, it offers a justification, warning, excuse or rationalization, indicating a lack of confidence in the outcome and leaving room for failure in the event that things don’t work out. After a project is completed,

it offers an escape clause, justifying why things went south so you were unable to complete the project as planned, thus allowing you to deflect responsibility for the outcome.

Examples: “Even though we have the supplies, we still might not make the deadline.” “Even though the festival happened on time, we still ended up over budget.”

But or However: Indicates your reservations whether a suggested change is even possible. “However” is a little more hopeful, offering alternatives in the event of failure.

Examples: “But what about...?” “But I don’t know how to...” “But I can’t”, “But it’s not possible.”

“However, if it does crash and burn, we could always try...”

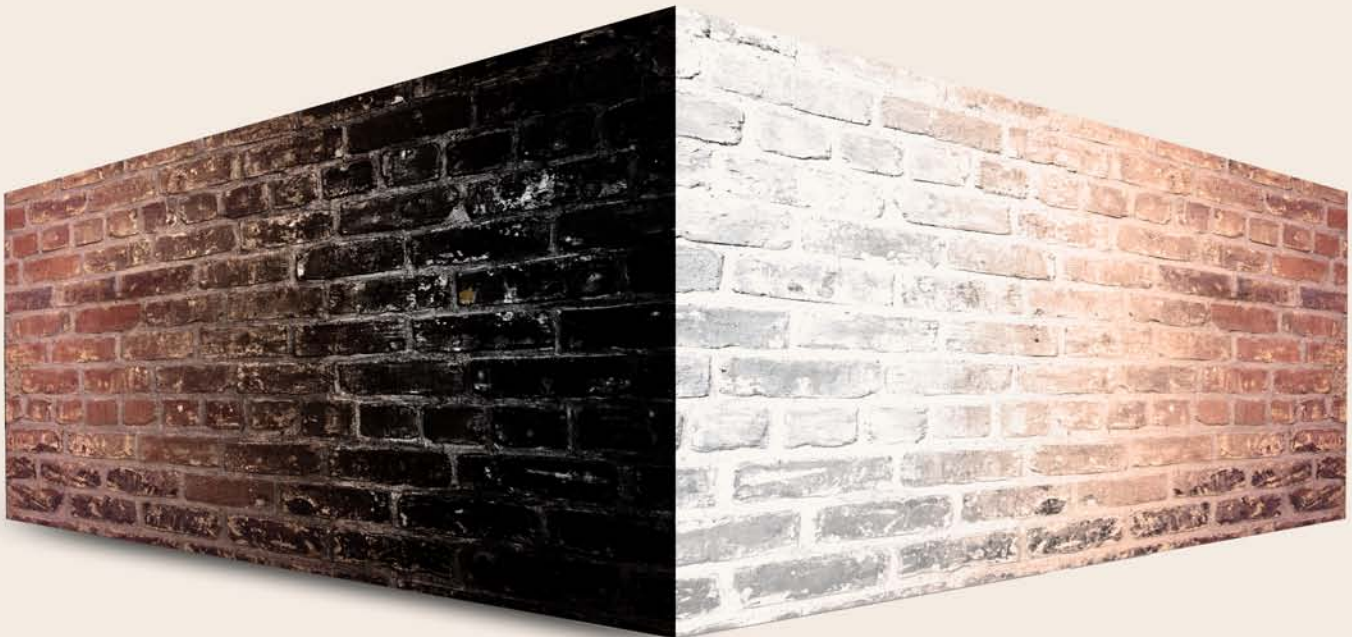
Yeah, but: This last one’s huge. It indicates a subconscious fear — that the project is too big or overwhelming, that you can’t do it or don’t know how, that you’re incompetent, that you’re not good enough. It’s the amygdala keeping you safe from the unknown.

“Yeah but” is the catch-all procrastination trigger, because it subtly indicates that the other person is entitled to a wrong opinion, even though *you* know that the “real truth” precludes any possibility of acting on that opinion. However, your “truth” is all too likely a limiting belief, based on familiarity and reluctance to change.

“Shoulds” or Obligations

Should or **Ought to**: Use of the words “*should*” or “*ought to*” have a built-in reluctance. They hold a heavy, depressing feeling about them that indicates our lizard brain is hard at work trying to convince us to do something else — *anything* else. Our “*shoulds*” are frequently obligations imposed on us from outside influences: — job requirements, necessary tasks like household chores or favours requested by friends or family. Sometimes, these “*shoulds*” can’t be avoided, tasks like doing our taxes or fixing the furnace, so we do them as fast as possible to get them out of the way. Often, they turn out to be far less scary or difficult than we originally thought, and we wonder why it took so long to get around to them. (Incidentally, “**get around to it**” is another good procrastination trigger phrase.)

Core Identity or All-or-Nothing



These are the most effective stopping words of all, because they’re so much a part of who we see ourselves as being; unchangeable, carved in stone. Our habits are a reflection of our identity and if we want to change our habits, we need to re-think who we are at our core — our beliefs, our values and our moral code.

The concept of self-integrity plays a big part here and the habits we’ve developed give us the best clues about who we truly are, compared with who we’d like the world to think we are. Everyone is the hero of his or her own life story, but we lie to ourselves all the time. We must learn to recognize those lies, and begin to change our behaviour to be a better reflection of the person we’d like to be, rather than the kind of person who commits those acts of self-betrayal. The first step is to recognize the words that betray our subconscious self-evaluation.

Core Identity or All-or-Nothing

For example, we might say something like: “Sorry I’m late. It won’t happen again,” when deep down, we know that we’re usually late for appointments and we’ll probably be late next time, too. This is a betrayal of self-integrity. We’ve lied to the other person, and what’s worse, we’ve lied to ourselves, because at the time, we actually believe it.

Never, Always or **Forever**: These words should be a red flag. If you’re “*always*” or “*never*” anything, it leaves no room for change. It gives you an escape clause, a loophole that can’t be refuted. Statements like this mean it’s okay to be less than you can be, and you don’t have to do the work necessary to become a different kind of person. You never have to leave your comfort zone.

Examples: “I never win anything.” “I’m always tripping over things.”

Change is hard, scary and uncertain. *Always* or *Never* statements ensure that things can stay the same, *forever*, and the amygdala stays quiet. There’s no middle road to this option. Something’s either true or false. There’s no in-between, which leaves zero room for negotiation, so why bother trying.

When applied to one’s behaviour, these words indicate a core limiting belief, often based on insecurity or a lack of self-worth. It’s all-or-nothing thinking, and is often followed by a justification word or phrase.

Example: All-or-Nothing Statement: “I never drink alcohol.”

Justification: “It’s the devil’s brew.”

I do, or I don’t (like, have, think, want, etc.), or I hate... This is another circumstance that allows you the safety of not having to change.

Example: “I hate exercising.” When I say that, it gives me an excuse not to go through the difficult and possibly painful process of becoming more healthy and fit. Similarly, “I don’t like vegetables.”

A statement like, “I don’t think it’s a good idea” means I’m not going to give it much thought, if any, because it doesn’t fit my preconceptions.

I am, or I’m not a... This is how we identify ourselves to others. We say things like, “I’m a smoker” or “I’m a lover, not a fighter”. These are rigid definitions of who we think we are, and when we say them, it reinforces the belief that it’s true.

But if we can learn to accept that perhaps these beliefs might just be limiting us in some way, we can change these self-identities by changing our habits and the words we say, both to ourselves and to others.

Some Physical Symptoms of Procrastination Triggers

Many of these are flight, fright or freeze reactions triggered by the amygdala to alert you to danger, and they can give you further clues about when or whether you're procrastinating. You may recognize some of them.

- Depression, general sense of malaise
- Frustration or annoyance
- Overwhelm
- Lack of energy
- Sleepiness
- Attention deficit
- Nervous sweat
- Sweaty palms
- Clenching teeth
- Need to urinate
- Shallow breathing
- Confusion
- Brain fog
- Vague feeling of guilt
- Nagging sense of something forgotten or neglected
- Boredom (especially with a particular task)
- Butterflies in the stomach (especially when you think about starting the task)
- Restlessness, unable to settle to anything
- Sudden desire to do a different, recently avoided task
- Tension in the shoulders, neck, arms, face
- Irritation with no apparent cause

In extreme cases, avoidance and fear can even lead to:

- Vomiting
- Loss of bladder or sphincter control
- Psychosomatic illnesses
- Rashes
- Headaches
- Referred pain from chronic tension or favouring a physical weakness
- And even more serious illnesses such as cancer, mental illness or self-mutilation



Spotting Your Own Procrastination Triggers

We've covered some of the more common procrastination trigger words and phrases. There are many more, and each person has habitual ones they use, generally sub-consciously, to keep them in the "safe zone", away from unfamiliar new situations.

Habit and familiarity may keep us safe, but they also keep us stagnant and prevent us from being everything we can be. Only change can teach us new ways of being. And it's only through learning new skills and abilities that we can improve ourselves.

I challenge you to find your own trigger words - the ones you use when you are making excuses and justifications for not doing what you know you "should" be doing (or even the things you really want to do). What are the phrases you use to talk yourself out of accomplishing your dreams and goals?

This can be a difficult thing to do on your own. If you have a trusted friend, spouse or family member who knows you well, you can ask them to point out your habitual self-sabotage words and phrases, but I warn you, you may find it very uncomfortable.

Usually, the first indication that they may be right is when you get annoyed or angry.

We cherish our limiting beliefs. They've kept us safe for years and years and we're most reluctant to give them up. Doing so is scary and unfamiliar. These reactions learned in childhood may have kept us safe, but they've become inappropriate behaviours in adults, so if we really want to get what we desire, we need to become the kind of person who achieves those goals.

So how do we do it?





Exercises

When we think about starting on something the amygdala sees as dangerous, there are thoughts, words and physical sensations that accompany that idea.

1. Try to remember the thoughts you had or the words you spoke just before you started avoiding the task. You may find a clue in the words your lizard brain fed you so that you wouldn't venture into dangerous territory.
2. When you catch yourself using these words, notice too, the physical symptoms that accompany them. Try to recall the moment you felt your energy drop or some other subtle discomfort accompanying the words and phrases preceding your avoidance.
3. You may discover over time that there are words you regularly use as excuses not to do something. Try to pinpoint one word or phrase that you use habitually to talk yourself out of doing something. It will show up in your thoughts and in your speech. It may be one from the list above, or it may be one unique to you.
4. It might take time to recognize the word or phrase as a procrastination trigger, but once you do, you'll start to be aware of it whenever it comes up. That's the Reticular Activating System serving up information that's important to you. Simply notice how often you use the word(s) and in which circumstances.
5. As you begin to notice the same words and phrases showing up over and over, you'll slowly become aware of how often they're stopping you from doing the things you say you want to do.
6. Write down your own procrastination trigger words and phrases. Noticing is the first and most important step.

7. Once you've learned to notice your triggers, you can change the words to a more appropriate statement or affirmation that you can actually believe — one that doesn't feel like a lie. Write some alternate words and phrases to replace your triggers.

Conclusion

So all those years ago, when I took that Law of Attraction course, it's not surprising that I didn't get what I wanted. My amygdala perceived my hope, my goal, my dream as being much too big, scary and dangerous to let me achieve it. I'd have to change too drastically and I'd no longer be in safe, familiar territory. I'd have to become a very different person, and that couldn't be allowed to happen. So it kept me "safe" for years with distractions, misinformation and red herrings it knew I could handle.

Only when I started noticing my procrastination triggers and took responsibility for creating the habits and ways of being that could acknowledge and deal with them in a more mature and adult manner, did my RAS begin to serve up to me the opportunities that would let me find peace, calm and a measure of success.

With awareness and a commitment to change, you too can begin to make those tiny, incremental changes that will eventually lead you to a bigger, better, more abundant life. And it all starts with recognizing, maybe for the first time, those limiting beliefs that trigger your procrastination.