When Your Lizard Brain Gains the Upperhand: Information and Action Planning to Avoid Procrastination

“Lizard brain” is a term commonly used used for the amygdala – the oldest part of the human brain - a part that animals possess, and that humans had even before they evolved into humans. The lizard brain is a center for emotional responses. Importantly, It’s the home of your “fight or flight” response impulse. It is there to keep you safe in a world full of threats. It causes you to want to avoid things that are “too” anything – too big, too strong, too complicated, too hard, too frustrating. It wants you to feel safe and comfortable, but it keeps you from taking the risks that will make you excellent.

The first part of this document details how the “lizard brain” works. The second part offers a list of additional facts about procrastination. The third part offers a two-step plan for addressing your lizard brain and tackling your procrastination.

Part One: Introducing your Lizard Brain

The lizard brain is powerful
It is so powerful, that it can cause you to avoid what you think you should be doing. The impulse to avoid a bad thing, or do a pleasing one, is so strong you might rationalize your choice even when you know it is bad.

Indeed, your lizard brain usually decides how you are going to feel about something before you even have time to think about it (saving your life may depend on it!). Our thoughts follow the lizard brain reaction, and are often influenced by it.

For example, if you procrastinate on calculus homework by playing a video game, you probably told yourself “I will have time to study later”, or ”I am just going to do this a little but, so that I can relax and not be anxious about my homework”. Your brain sought relief from a stressor (the work) by influencing what action you chose to do. You had time to rationalize against it, but instead thought of ways to make the stress-relieving move happen.

But the Lizard brain has weaknesses
It’s a lizard brain. It’s tough, but not thoughtful. You can trick it. Putting things off quiets the lizard brain, but lots of other things do too. The lizard brain can’t tell if a small task is actually part of a bigger task, for example. It can’t see the future, it is only focused on avoiding the bad feelings that you are having right now. So, breaking down your task into smaller steps and choosing to do a smaller step is one way to bypass the lizard brain response.

Keys to tricking your lizard brain and overcoming procrastination:

• For each negative thought you think about class, whenever you think it: Pause, and make a note of the fact that you just thought something negative. Then, come up with a
positive spin. Spend just a moment re-framing or replacing that thought in your mind. This is a great way to un-learn negativity.

- Break large things into smaller things, and then thinking only about the smaller things.
- Knowing that the lizard brain only focuses on the present, remove *temptations* from the here and now. Make rewarding, stress-relieving distractions less available to you.
- Celebrate your victories and accept your defeats, but persist at all costs. Your lizard brain is powerful. Your plan will work, but it will require time, and you will never be fully free of the temptation to procrastinate..

**Part two: More procrastination facts**

- Procrastination is natural. Everybody does it. EVERYBODY.
- Procrastination is **not** laziness. Laziness is not wanting to set or achieve a goal. Procrastination is *having* a goal, but avoiding working toward it even though it is what you want. It is what people do because they are anxious or unhappy about something, *not* because they don't care.
- Procrastination is related to a natural brain function. The part of our brain that controls emotional response to stimuli (seeks pleasure, and avoids pain) is the part that is responsible for procrastination. Many people call this part “Lizard brain”, - any animal that runs from danger, fights when cornered, or seeks pleasure has this function.
- A common feature of procrastination is to put things off til later. This is because the lizard brain feels more comfortable when the present is anxiety-free. It doesn’t think about the future. Even if the thought that you are procrastinating makes you anxious, your natural impulse will still be to put it off til later.
- Procrastination often happens as a response to anxiety, fear, and negativity. The better we feel about something, the less likely we are to procrastinate.
- Procrastination is difficult to avoid, but you can get better at it battling it with practice. You need to be persistent and keep trying.
- Practice takes time. In fighting procrastination, you will make mistakes at first. But don’t allow yourself to worry, because if you sweat the mistakes, you might actually procrastinate more.
- People procrastinate in many ways – some actually do one kind of work to avoid another kind.
- Some people aren’t aware that they are procrastinating. They blame their difficulties on other things: Lack of time, Lack of cooperation by others, lack of ability, etc. This blaming, like delaying is an attempt to alleviate anxiety.
- Procrastination is not a time management issue. It is an avoidance issue. It is a deep psychological reaction to things which make you feel uncomfortable.
- There is a difference between doing things that are fun and procrastinating by doing things that are fun. When you have time for fun and you get your business taken care of, you are relaxing. When you are having fun but your business needs taking care of, you are procrastinating.
• Making a fixed, detailed schedule on paper is a vital key to defeating procrastination because it makes you see that things are doable and real. People who say they don’t need to write things down tend to have the greatest difficulty with procrastinating.

• People with ADHD may be likely to blame their procrastination on ADHD, but they shouldn’t. Assigning blame can itself be part of procrastination.

• Procrastination is not only avoiding things for a long time. “micro procrastination” can include web surfing in class, popping on facebook while studying, texting while studying, talking to friends on the quad and being late for class.

• An important strategy for dealing with procrastination is to catch yourself having negative, worrying thoughts and recognizing them for what they are – new sources of anxiety. Once we are mindful of negative thought patterns, they begin to stop.

• Beer and drugs are not only used to procrastinate, but they increase the likelihood of procrastination for a long time after you bounce back because they impact your brain chemistry in ways you can’t necessarily feel, but which make it harder to do work effectively. That adds stress, which compounds the problem.

• Not all procrastination activities are bad – in fact, some are important. Talking to your parents, reading a newspaper, even studying for another class can be procrastinating.

• You don’t “cure” procrastination, you “counter” it. The better you get at countering it, the less likely you are to do it – not because your lizard brain changes, but because your response mechanisms change. The rest of your brain rewrites itself to deal with procrastination better.

• Key to dealing with procrastination: reduce your work to short small tasks, and focus your thinking on one of them at a time.

• Key to dealing with procrastination: remove temptation from your path. If you are going to procrastinate by drinking, don’t keep any beer in your room. If you’re going to procrastinate on FB, have a trusted friend change your password. If you’re going to procrastinate with video games, study without your computer, go to the library, or move your x-box into some else’s room.

• Recognize the difference between a compulsive, relief seeking avoidance choice and an addiction. No matter what the habit, if you try to stop it and just can’t, you may be addicted to your source of relief. Addiction comes when the action creates a chemical reward in your brain and you begin to seek the reward regardless of consequence. In other words, it becomes habit. Addictions usually require help to think about and address. If you feel like your stress-relieving behavior – playing video games, playing with your phone, smoking pot – have developed a powerful pull of their own, you may want to think about treating them as addictions.
Part three: Developing effective responses

**Activity one:** Very often, the thoughts we have when we’re procrastinating are generated to justify the avoidance behavior. For example, if we have a tough class and we can’t understand the professor very well, we might chose to avoid dealing with it by skipping class. But we wouldn’t say to ourselves “I am skipping class because this class scares me” – so we might say “I am skipping this class because there is no point in going because I can’t understand the professor”.

Here are some examples of things you might think in order for your brain to feel at peace with a decision to procrastinate. But how do you counter these thoughts with thoughts that don’t freak out your lizard brain?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When lizard brain makes you think:</th>
<th>A good, strategic response would be:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I emailed my professor but he hasn’t emailed me back; I don’t want to bother him</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do my best work under deadline pressure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have time for a nap</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can going to the library later</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am going to start studying for that test on Monday</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can follow this lecture and be on tumblr at the same time; she puts the notes on sakai so it’s all good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Activity two: responding

When I tell myself: ____________________________________________________________

My source of anxiety might be: _______________________________________________

So a good strategic response would be: _________________________________________

When I tell myself: __________________________________________________________

My source of anxiety might be: _______________________________________________

So a good strategic response would be: _________________________________________

When I tell myself: __________________________________________________________

My source of anxiety might be: _______________________________________________

So a good strategic response would be: _________________________________________