

## Introduction

# Lessons from Procrastination and Medical Side Effects

I don't know about you, but I have never met anyone who never procrastinates. Delaying annoying tasks is a nearly universal problem—one that is incredibly hard to curb, no matter how hard we try to exert our willpower and self-control or how many times we resolve to reform. Allow me to share a personal story about one way I learned to deal with my own tendency to procrastinate. Many years ago I experienced a devastating accident. A large magnesium flare exploded next to me and left 70 percent of my body covered with third-degree burns (an experience I wrote about in *Predictably Irrational\**). As if to add insult to injury, I acquired hepatitis from an infected blood transfusion after three weeks in the hospital. Obviously, there is never a good time to get a virulent liver disease, but the timing of its onset was particularly unfortunate because I was already in such bad shape. The disease increased the risk of complications, delayed my treatment, and caused my body to reject many skin transplants. To make matters worse, the

\*Readers of *Predictably Irrational* with a particularly good memory may recall part of this story.

doctors didn't know what type of liver disease I had. They knew I wasn't suffering from hepatitis A or B, but they couldn't identify the strain. After a while the illness subsided, but it still slowed my recovery by flaring up from time to time and wreaking havoc on my system.

Eight years later, when I was in graduate school, a flare-up hit me hard. I checked into the student health center, and after many blood tests the doctor gave me a diagnosis: it was hepatitis C, which had recently been isolated and identified. As lousy as I felt, I greeted this as good news. First, I finally knew what I had; second, a promising new experimental drug called interferon looked as if it might be an effective treatment for hepatitis C. The doctor asked whether I'd consider being part of an experimental study to test the efficacy of interferon. Given the threats of liver fibrosis and cirrhosis and the possibility of early death, it seemed that being part of the study was clearly the preferred path.

The initial protocol called for self-injections of interferon three times a week. The doctors told me that after each injection I would experience flulike symptoms including fever, nausea, headaches, and vomiting—warnings that I soon discovered to be perfectly accurate. But I was determined to kick the disease, so every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening over the next year and a half, I carried out the following ritual: Once I got home, I would take a needle from the medicine cabinet, open the refrigerator, load the syringe with the right dosage of interferon, plunge the needle deep into my thigh, and inject the medication. Then I would lie down in a big hammock—the only interesting piece of furniture in my loftlike student apartment—from which I had a perfect view of the television. I kept a bucket within reach to catch the vomit that would inevitably come and a blanket to

fend off the shivering. About an hour later the nausea, shivering, and headache would set in, and at some point I would fall asleep. By noon the next day I would have more or less recovered and would return to my classwork and research.

Along with the other patients in the study, I wrestled not only with feeling sick much of the time, but also with the basic problem of procrastination and self-control. Every injection day was miserable. I had to face the prospect of giving myself a shot followed by a sixteen-hour bout of sickness in the hope that the treatment would cure me in the long run. I had to endure what psychologists call a “negative immediate effect” for the sake of a “positive long-term effect.” This is the type of problem we all experience when we fail to do short-term tasks that will be good for us down the road. Despite the prodding of conscience, we often would rather avoid doing something unpleasant now (exercising, working on an annoying project, cleaning out the garage) for the sake of a better future (being healthier, getting a job promotion, earning the gratitude of one’s spouse).

At the end of the eighteen-month trial, the doctors told me that the treatment was successful and that I was the only patient in the protocol who had always taken the interferon as prescribed. Everyone else in the study had skipped the medication numerous times—hardly surprising, given the unpleasantness involved. (Lack of medical compliance is, in fact, a very common problem.)

So how did I get through those months of torture? Did I simply have nerves of steel? Like every person who walks the earth, I have plenty of self-control problems and, every injection day, I deeply wanted to avoid the procedure. But I did have a trick for making the treatment more bearable. For me, the key was movies. I love movies and, if I had the time, I

would watch one every day. When the doctors told me what to expect, I decided to motivate myself with movies. Besides, I couldn't do much else anyway, thanks to the side effects.

Every injection day, I would stop at the video store on the way to school and pick up a few films that I wanted to see. Throughout the day, I would think about how much I would enjoy watching them later. Once I got home, I would give myself the injection. Then I would immediately jump into my hammock, make myself comfortable, and start my mini film fest. That way, I learned to associate the act of the injection with the rewarding experience of watching a wonderful movie. Eventually, the negative side effects kicked in, and I didn't have such a positive feeling. Still, planning my evenings that way helped me associate the injection more closely with the fun of watching a movie than with the discomfort of the side effects, and thus I was able to continue the treatment. (I was also fortunate, in this instance, that I have a relatively poor memory, which meant that I could watch some of the same movies over and over again.)

