

Playing for time

For many students, procrastination is a way of life

BY JEREMY NELSON

WINNIPEG (CUP) — "There's no such thing as a deadline."

This phrase embodies the philosophy of University of Winnipeg student Mike Kolbus.

While most students occasionally put off writing an assignment, Kolbus, 21, makes it his sworn duty to hand in the majority of his assignments late.

Since beginning his bachelor's degree four years ago, the history student has managed to make deadlines only four times.

"I'll always be a procrastinator," said Kolbus. "I was born late and I'll die late — that's just the way it is."

Asked why he views deadlines as suggestions, Kolbus simply laughs.

"Because I can. In high school the extensions had to be fought for really hard — they were really rigid and stupid there," he said.

"I think one of the most valuable things I've learned in university is how to negotiate stuff like how to hand in a paper a week late without being penalized."

Although few students are as comfortable dragging their feet as Kolbus, his difficulty with time management isn't unique.

Studies have suggested that between 40 and 80 percent of students dilly-dally regularly.

"It's certainly the most common problem among university students," said Lilly Walker, chief psychologist at the University of Manitoba's counselling service.

"For some people procrastination is a lifestyle and it just causes them a bit of stress. But for some individuals it destroys their academic performance and with it, their career possibilities."

Procrastination can also leave deep emotional scars as students gradually lose faith in their abilities because of low grades and missed opportunities.

"The guilt is so self-destructive that it can have really serious side effects if it isn't dealt with," said Walker.

For Kolbus, putting off studying involves any number of distractions.

"I'll do just about anything when I'm procrastinating," he says with a laugh. "When I've got a lot of essays due, my room is probably the cleanest it will ever be. My

friends find I'm the most willing to go out and drop everything around exam time. Basically, I'll do anything rather than do an unpleasant thing like write an essay."

While the definition of procrastination may be simple, the root of the problem is often complex, ranging from poor time-management skills to low self-esteem.

But Walker said that while most procrastinators have several reasons for delaying unpleasant obligations, they generally fit into four categories — the perfectionist, the postponer, the politician and the punisher.

Perfectionists set such high goals for themselves that they delay projects until they're in the perfect frame of mind; even then their intense fear of failure often holds them back. Creative and astute, they often slip into fantasies as a way of putting off unpleasant or unexpected situations.

Then there are postponers, who live for the moment because they find routines and structures confining. These ditherers thrive on the difficult situations caused by deadlines, and use procrastination as a way to avoid feeling responsible for their own destiny.

People whose self-perception is based on what others think of

in a month he'll sit in front of his computer for hours and only write one page, but if it's due in two days he can write the entire thing in just a few hours.

"I have no idea why that is but it seems to work," he said. "Pressure is what I need."

Walker says procrastinators require pressure because they're addicted to the feeling of conquering seemingly impossible odds.

"The pressure charges them up, gives them an adrenaline rush and lets them stay up all night to get their essay or project done," she said.

Walker says the best way to counter this is for the procrastinator to find other ways to get a rush.

"Until those pressures come, they can't get their motivation up," she explains.

"So what we tell them to do is to chop their deadlines into chunks. Rather than having a paper

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with a big deadline, make mini-deadlines with the parts: have a deadline for when your research has to be done, when your draft has to be written and when your final copy is due."

Aside from addiction to pressure, Walker said the university environment — which she terms a "procrastination system" — also prompts students to put things off until the last minute.

The lack of a rigid structure in university allows students to drag their feet instead of learning valuable time-management skills.

For many students, university marks the first time they're free of formal structures — and the first time they can take charge of their

Kolbus says if an essay is due



own future.

For some students, this freedom spurs them to take control of their time and gain a sense of empowerment from doing so. For others, it means learning to procrastinate.

But while procrastinators can get away with humming and hawing for some time, Walker said the habit eventually catches up with them and makes them reconsider their ways.

"The only reason we change anything is when we meet a crisis," she explains. "It could be a small crisis or a big one, but it is always something. As long as procrastination is costing less than the benefits, then procrastinators will keep putting off their responsibilities."

Jeanna Struntinsky, coordinator of the University of Manitoba's peer advisors centre, agrees. She said many students make the mistake of dismissing minor crises instead of dealing with them before major problems arise.

"Around exams and mid-terms a lot more people come to the peer advisors offices [with procrastination problems]," said Struntinsky.

"A lot of the time all we need to do is take people back to the basics and tell them that they really need to schedule their time better instead of cramming it in at the last minute — common sense stuff that people need gentle reminders about."

The ever-stalling Kolbus experienced his crisis last year when he almost failed several courses because he let his work pile up.

At one point, he wrote the first draft of a 6,000-word essay two nights before it was due, picked up the corrected version the next day, stayed up all night re-writing it and then handed in the final copy. That day, he also had to write a final

exam for the same class.

"In university you don't get nailed right away because the first years can be so easy," said Kolbus. "Then all of a sudden you get to a point where you realize you can't get away with it anymore. I think the assignments and essays get to a certain point where you can't do it all in one night, you have to learn to spread it out."

When procrastinators realize their stalling tactics are no longer paying off, they must deal with their habit the right way, said Walker.

"You have to face yourself," said Walker. "Admit you are a procrastinator and realize what areas are causing your problems. Then, consult with either a counsellor or a book to understand the particular roots of your procrastination and what you can do to correct it."

"Most procrastinators simply have never learned proper time-management skills. But once they develop these basic abilities, they quickly recover."

Walker advises procrastinators to start small when trying to learn how to meet deadlines.

Kolbus insists he'll always be a procrastinator. But since his crisis last year he's learned to manage his time a bit better. While he still regularly seeks extensions, he now stays on top of his assignments and does at least some of the work beforehand.

"It's just one of those things that you have to get slowly into," he said. "I think it's normal to procrastinate in university but what you learn at some point is that it is not necessary to pull an all-nighter. You don't need to abuse your body like that — it screws up your sleeping patterns and that's far from healthy."

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