The Suspended Step

Navigating Procrastination in Recovery

Experience, Strength & Hope · The Recovery Files

A compelling narrative about the paradox of procrastination in recovery-being hyperaware of time while letting it slip away.

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Time moves differently now. In active addiction, it was a blur—days bleeding into nights, weekends indistinguishable from weekdays, everything subordinate to the next fix, the next drink, the next escape. Now, in recovery, I'm acutely aware of time—its passage, its weight, its potential. Yet I find myself caught in a strange paradox: hyperaware of time while simultaneously letting it slip through my fingers.

They have a term for it in recovery circles: "procrastination." Such a clinical word for something that feels more like quicksand—a gradual, almost imperceptible sinking. Or perhaps it's closer to standing at the edge of a cold lake, telling yourself you'll dive in soon, just not yet, not right now. Another minute of preparation. Another hour of consideration. Another day of planning. Always tomorrow.

When my counselor first handed me that self-assessment on procrastination and complacency, I felt a flash of defensiveness. I'm showing up to meetings, aren't I? I'm sober, aren't I? What more do they want?But as I moved through each question, rating myself honestly—a 4 for prioritizing short-term comfort over long-term goals, a 5 for engaging in distractions to avoid discomfort—I began to recognize a familiar pattern.

> *The same psychological mechanisms that once protected my addiction have shapeshifted into new forms of avoidance.*

In active addiction, avoidance was my constant companion. I avoided feelings, responsibilities, consequences, intimacy—anything that threatened to pierce the protective bubble of substance use. Now, eight months into recovery, I'm still avoiding, just with different tools. Netflix binges instead of drinking binges. Scrolling through social media instead of calling my sponsor when I'm struggling. Cleaning my apartment meticulously instead of working on the fourth step that terrifies me. The substance has changed, but the behavior remains.

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My therapist calls it "the path of least resistance." The brain, she explains, is efficiency-oriented; it will naturally gravitate toward what feels easiest in the moment. And what feels easiest is rarely what serves my recovery. The meditation practice that grounds me requires discipline. The honest conversations that strengthen my relationships demand vulnerability. The career rebuilding that will secure my future needs sustained effort. All of these things live on the other side of resistance, and some days, that resistance feels insurmountable.

The most insidious part is how reasonable my procrastination sounds in my own mind. I'll start that job search after I've been sober a full year—better to focus on recovery first. I'll reach out to make amends with my brother once I feel more stable. I'll try that recovery yoga class next month when I'm in better shape.Each justification seems logical, even prudent. It's only when I step back that I see the pattern: always later, never now.

> "*Recovery is like rowing a boat upstream—the moment you stop actively rowing, you start drifting backward.*"

There's a particular type of procrastination unique to recovery that I've noticed in myself and others—what some call "recovery complacency." It's the belief that simply not using is enough, that abstinence alone equals recovery. In early sobriety, this misconception protected me from overwhelm. Just make it through today without using—that was achievement enough. But as days accumulated into months, this minimal standard became a ceiling rather than a floor.

I see it in others sometimes, especially those with more time than me. They make the meetings but participate less actively. They mentor newcomers but neglect their own continuing growth. They treat recovery as a destination they've reached rather than a path they're walking. And inevitably, slowly, their connection to recovery begins to fray around the edges.

The old-timers have a saying: "Recovery is like rowing a boat upstream—the moment you stop actively rowing, you start drifting backward." When I first heard this, it struck me as dramatic, even harsh. Surely there's a middle ground, a plateau where one can rest? But experience has taught me otherwise. The current of old habits, old thinking patterns, old reflexes—it's always there, always pulling. Complacency isn't neutral; it's surrender to that current.

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What frightens me most about my own procrastination is how it isolates me from others in recovery. When I put off calling someone when I'm struggling, when I avoid sharing honestly in meetings because it feels too vulnerable, when I make excuses to skip fellowship events because social anxiety feels overwhelming—I'm essentially choosing comfort over connection. And connection, I've learned, is the lifeline of recovery.

There was a moment in group therapy last month that stays with me. Marissa, a woman with three years of sobriety, shared about recognizing her own complacency. "I realized I was doing just enough to stay sober," she said, "but not enough to actually heal or grow. I was like a car idling in a parking lot—engine running but going nowhere." Her words landed like a stone in still water, sending ripples of recognition through the circle. I saw myself in her metaphor—engine running, going nowhere.

> *The paradox of recovery procrastination is that it's both completely understandable and potentially devastating.*

Understandable because recovery asks so much of us—emotional excavation, behavioral rewiring, identity reconstruction. Of course we hesitate at the threshold of such monumental work. Yet devastating because half-measures yield half-results, and in recovery, half-results often mean eventual relapse.

My sponsor tells me that behind every instance of procrastination lies fear. When I examine my own patterns of delay and avoidance, I find this to be painfully accurate. I procrastinate on the fourth step because I fear what I'll discover about myself. I put off joining that recovery running group because I fear judgment about my fitness level. I delay applying for better jobs because I fear rejection. Recovery asks us to move toward our fears rather than away from them, and some days, that feels like being asked to walk voluntarily into a burning building.

Last week, during a particularly low moment—one where the weight of all I've been avoiding felt crushing—I forced myself to attend a meeting I'd been skipping for months. Ironically, the topic was procrastination. A man with decades of sobriety shared something that pierced through my fog: "Procrastination is just borrowing trouble from tomorrow to avoid discomfort today. But compound interest is a killer—you always pay more later."

That metaphor of debt resonated deeply. Each avoided task, each delayed growth opportunity, each postponed connection—they're all debts accruing interest. The longer I wait to address my career situation, the fewer options I'll have and the more

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desperate I'll become. The longer I avoid dealing with the strained relationship with my parents, the more entrenched our patterns become. The longer I put off deepening my recovery practice, the more shallow and fragile my sobriety remains.

There's a particular shame that accompanies procrastination in recovery—a sense that I should be better, stronger, more committed. I watch others throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the process while I hesitate at the edges. This comparison only feeds the cycle: shame leads to avoidance, avoidance to disconnection, disconnection to more shame. Breaking this cycle requires what recovery literature calls "contrary action"—doing precisely what I don't want to do, what feels most uncomfortable or frightening.

Yesterday, I finally took one such contrary action. After weeks of putting it off, I called a career counselor who specializes in working with people in recovery. My hands actually shook as I dialed. The conversation was brief, an initial consultation, but it represented crossing a threshold I'd been avoiding. The relief I felt afterward was disproportionate to the actual effort involved—a reminder that the anticipation of discomfort is often worse than the discomfort itself.

> *I'm learning, slowly, that motivation often follows action rather than preceding it.*

My counselor introduced me to the concept of "SMART steps"—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound actions. Breaking down overwhelming tasks into these manageable components has been revelatory. Instead of the amorphous goal of "work on career rebuilding," I now have specific weekly actions: update resume by Wednesday, research three companies in my field by Friday, reach out to one professional contact by Sunday. The concreteness makes avoidance more difficult; there's less room for the vague "later" that procrastination thrives on.

I rarely feel like going to my recovery yoga class, but I always feel better having gone. I seldom feel enthusiastic about calling my sponsor when I'm struggling, but the connection always alleviates the struggle. I'm trying to trust the process over my feelings—to row the boat upstream even when my arms ache and the current seems too strong.

Recovery literature speaks often about "one day at a time," a mantra that helped me immensely in early sobriety when the thought of never using again was overwhelming. But I'm discovering that this principle applies differently to procrastination. Sometimes it needs to be "one action at a time," or even "five minutes at a time." Can I work on my

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fourth step for just five minutes? Can I meditate for just five minutes? Almost always, the answer is yes. And often, five minutes becomes fifteen, becomes thirty, as the initial resistance dissolves.

There's a delicate balance in addressing procrastination in recovery—between self-compassion and accountability, between accepting my limitations and challenging myself to grow beyond them. Too harsh, and shame takes over; too lenient, and complacency sets in. I'm learning to speak to myself as I would to a friend in recovery: with understanding for the difficulty of the path, but unwavering belief in their capacity to walk it.

What gives me hope is witnessing others overcome their own procrastination and complacency. The woman who finally returned to school at forty-five after years of putting it off. The man who reconciled with his estranged children after a decade of avoidance. The friend who, after months of hesitation, finally began sharing honestly about his mental health struggles alongside his addiction. Their courage inspires my own.

> *Recovery isn't a straight line but a spiral—revisiting the same issues at different levels of understanding and strength.*

I may never fully conquer procrastination, just as I may never fully conquer the addictive thinking that led me here. But each time I choose action over avoidance, connection over isolation, growth over comfort—I strengthen the neural pathways of recovery. I row a little further upstream.

Tomorrow, I'll call my brother—the conversation I've been putting off for months. Not because I feel ready (I don't), not because it will be easy (it won't), but because recovery happens in actions, not intentions. In the space between intention and action lies the whole territory of addiction; in the closing of that gap lies the promise of recovery.

For today, for this moment, I choose to step forward rather than stand still—to dive into the cold lake rather than remain perpetually on its shore. The water may shock my system, but at least I'll be swimming, moving, alive with the possibility of reaching the other side.

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THE MATCHED SELF-ASSESSMENT

Recovery Momentum Assessment

This self-assessment is designed to help individuals in recovery evaluate patterns of procrastination and complacency that may impact their healing journey. The assessment explores both active procrastination (deliberately delaying important tasks) and passive complacency (losing momentum and engagement in recovery).

There are no right or wrong answers - the goal is to promote self-awareness and identify areas for growth.

Two Dimensions of Recovery Momentum:

- Active Procrastination: Deliberately delaying important recovery tasks and responsibilities
- Complacency & Stagnation: Losing momentum, settling for minimal effort, going through motions

Instructions

For each statement, rate how often it applies to you using the scale:

- 1 - Never: This doesn't apply to you
- 2 - Rarely: This occasionally applies
- 3 - Sometimes: This sometimes applies
- 4 - Often: This frequently applies
- 5 - Always: This consistently applies

Part 1: Active Procrastination

1. I put off tasks or responsibilities related to my recovery, such as attending meetings, therapy, or self-care practices
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
2. I find myself making excuses or justifications for delaying or avoiding important actions in my recovery
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
3. I struggle with feelings of apathy, boredom, or lack of motivation in my recovery journey
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
4. I tend to prioritize short-term comfort or convenience over my long-term recovery goals and well-being
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
5. I have difficulty breaking down large or overwhelming tasks into smaller, manageable steps
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
6. I engage in distracting or time-wasting activities to avoid facing challenges or discomfort in my recovery
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

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7. I spend excessive time planning or preparing for tasks rather than taking action
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
8. I wait until the last minute to complete important recovery-related commitments
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
9. I tell myself "I'll do it later" regarding important recovery work, but later never comes
   ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
10. I use perfectionism as an excuse to delay taking action in my recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

Part 2: Complacency and Stagnation

11. I feel stuck or stagnant in my recovery, as if I am not making progress or growing
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
12. I have become comfortable with my current level of recovery and stopped pushing myself to grow
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
13. I avoid trying new recovery activities or tools because my current routine feels "good enough"
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
14. I find myself going through the motions in recovery without full engagement
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
15. I have stopped setting new goals or challenges for myself in recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
16. I minimize or ignore warning signs that I may be becoming complacent
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
17. I compare myself to others who are "doing worse" to justify my own lack of progress
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
18. I have lost the sense of urgency I once had about my recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
19. I resist suggestions from others about ways I could strengthen my recovery
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always
20. I tell myself that maintaining the status quo is enough, even when I know I could do more
    ○ 1 Never ○ 2 Rarely ○ 3 Sometimes ○ 4 Often ○ 5 Always

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Reflection Questions

Understanding Patterns

1. Looking at your scores, what patterns do you notice about when and how you tend to procrastinate or become complacent?

2. What emotions or thoughts typically arise when you face challenging recovery tasks?

3. How do your procrastination and complacency patterns in recovery mirror patterns from active addiction?

Impact Assessment

4. How has procrastination affected your relationships with others in recovery?

5. What opportunities for growth have you missed due to complacency?

6. How does your current level of engagement align with your long-term recovery vision?

Underlying Factors

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7. What fears or limiting beliefs fuel your tendency to procrastinate?

8. What aspects of recovery feel most overwhelming or trigger avoidance?

9. How might comfort with the status quo be masking deeper recovery work needed?

Moving Forward

10. What specific, measurable actions could you take this week to build recovery momentum?

11. What accountability structures would help you follow through on commitments?

12. How can you balance self-acceptance with the healthy drive for continued growth?

Your scores, and what they mean, are in the app.

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