

## **Battling Procrastination with Mental Toughness Training**

**By Pamela Enders**

Gina was in trouble. She had a huge brief to write which was due in 2 days and she hadn't even started. Then there were the e-mails she had not yet responded to plus numerous phone calls. She had however, found time to read her three favorite blogs, to book flights and hotels for her next vacation, to purchase several books from Amazon, to check out some music on Rhapsody, and to research where she would have dinner that weekend. In short, Gina found time to do everything – except her work!

Gina referred to herself as “the Queen of Procrastinators” commenting that this had been a life-long problem for her. She had always managed to get by but now she worried that her job was in jeopardy. She had read – or had begun to read – several books on how to manage procrastination and sometimes she would try out a few of the tips for a while but nothing seemed to stick.

In meeting with Gina, I asked her more about what happened when she began to work on her brief. We discovered that as she began to write, her anxiety level began to increase to an uncomfortable level. She would have a hard time sitting still and concentrating on the task at hand. Surfing the internet or re-arranging her office helped to reduce the anxiety. In other words, the avoidance of work helped Gina feel more comfortable. But every time she turned her focus back to work, her anxiety would rise.

What was contributing to this anxiety? In Gina's case, her drive for perfection and her fear of failure were big factors in creating a nasty performance=anxiety cycle. When she started to work, her internal dialog went something like this: “I don't know enough about this; the judge will think I'm stupid; I'll never be as good as Karen; I can't think or write clearly.” Such negative thinking exacerbated her anxiety and undermined her ability to perform. No wonder she avoided work!

Gina agreed to keep track of her negative thinking for one week so she could become more attuned with her internal dialog. She was amazed at how much energy she was expending on thinking in such a negative manner. I then coached Gina to evaluate and confront her negative thoughts so that she could be more realistic and objective in her self assessments. Gina reported that this alone had helped her feel calmer and more in control.

The next step was to alter the negative association Gina had with work. I taught her some simple relaxation techniques and then coached her to do as follows: At her desk, she was instructed to relax, to help herself move into a pleasant positive state of inner calm and then and only then, begin to work on the task at hand. As soon as she felt even a twinge of anxiety, she was to stop everything and go back into the relaxation stance again. Once she was relaxed, she was to begin work again. Each time she felt anxious or uncomfortable or was tempted to blog or surf the net, she was to take a deep breath and go back into the relaxation stance.

Gina was being taught to retrain her mind and body to associate a pleasant feeling with work. Prior to this, Gina had inadvertently trained herself to associate work with unpleasant feelings which she then avoided by “procrastinating.”

At first Gina objected to the routine I suggested, “I’ll never get anything done if I have to stop everything each time I get anxious.” But then she realized that she wasn’t getting anything done anyway! Plus, 20 to 40 minutes of calm, focused attention directed towards her writing was much better than 6 hours of false starts and anxious rumination. Eventually, with ongoing coaching, Gina was able to transform her work style to an effective, productive one. No longer “The Queen of Procrastinators,” Gina now referred to herself as “The Empress of Productivity!”

The technique to improve productivity is as follows:

1. While sitting at your work place\*, place both feet on the ground, close your eyes and notice your breathing.
2. Think low and slow as you move your breath down from the chest to your abdomen, exhaling as slowly as possible.
3. With each slow exhale you will notice a deeper, more profound inhale. Enjoy and tell yourself that with each exhale you are relaxing more and more.
4. Repeat – slowly – at least 10 times.
5. Now, tell yourself to focus on what needs to get done and once you feel calm, begin your work.
6. As soon as you feel anxiety or discomfort, stop!
7. Resume the relaxation, and when calm, focus and resume work.
- 8, Repeat as needed.

\* Those who are relegated to cubicles may need to improvise!

Pamela Enders, Ph.D., of Masterful Performance Coaching ([www.pamelaenders.com](http://www.pamelaenders.com)), is a psychologist and a performance coach with 25 years of experience. She is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School.