

The WELL Office Podcast

Episode 12: I'll Do It Later: Understanding Procrastination and Sustaining Motivation with Dr. Sonia Rahimi

Pascale: [00:00:00] Welcome to The WELL Office podcast. My name is Pascale Gendreau and I am the UGME Wellness Consultant and Director of the wellness curriculum for medical learners,

Elizabeth: and I'm Elizabeth. The UGME Career Advisor for medical students.

Pascale: Today, we are here to talk about motivation procrastination, because these are concerns that we hear about all the time. Our aim is still let you know that you are not alone and help you understand why and what is in your control to beat procrastination and find motivation.

A common story that I hear about all the time is that at the end of a busy clinical day, it seems next to impossible to be like, oh yes, what I want to do right now is open my books. And in a way, that's what you're told you must do to be on top of things. We hear and we know this is really, really hard and it's really hard to find the motivation to get the work done.

You know, the typical example that we hear about is that people are aware in first year or second year when they have to study for exams, they know, you know, that it's [00:01:00] better to study longitudinally and, you know, and like to take it day by day and not be too late. But what we hear is that people know that's the best thing to do. But in practice, that's not what happens because they don't feel any stress. They tend to say, I don't want to cram, but they end up cramming anyways. And they feel so guilty about having crammed and they feel guilty for not having done the longitudinal thing. I'm hearing that it's hard for students to find their own rhythm, how to adapt, how to study, when to study and how to be motivated. Right, Elizabeth?

Elizabeth: Totally Pascale. One of the things I hear so much from students when they're talking to me about being as busy as they are, is I think for the first month or two of medical school, they feel pretty motivated and good to go. And then after a while, their motivation kind of goes in these sharp peaks and valleys where at the beginning of a block, especially in med one and two at the beginning of a block, they're kind of motivated. And then as the block goes along, the motivation drops and then the exam comes, their motivation goes up. And then after the exam, the motivation [00:02:00] drops again and sort of peaks and valleys. And it's hard to maintain this steady pace.

Pascale: And it's hard to change when it works, because what tends to happen is that they still get the grades.

So, it's like, why would I tell you.. when they fail.. I actually find that the people who are the most motivated to change are the one who actually failed or had, like something happened for them to like give them that kick that motivates them to actually change. But when you're getting the grades that you want, why change?

And then it's like, how, how long can I sustain this? So we have Dr. Sonia Rahimi. She is currently working as a postdoctoral fellow and her research focuses on the emotional and motivational processes, which underscores learning and personal development.

More specifically, she's interested in better understanding academic procrastination and time management. She has made several significant contributions to scholarly research, including a million conference presentations (no, 50) [00:03:00] at international and local conferences. And also she has been funded through several awards and scholarships, including the scholarship for Canada's social sciences and humanities research council.

Her research has been published at top journals with one of her papers being viewed nearly 50,000 times, bravo! So, yeah, please tell us about yourself. And also how years of research findings can help health professional learners with motivation and procrastinate.

Sonia: Hello, my name is Sonia. I thank you both for having me today. My background is in a lot of different things. I did my undergraduate degree in psychology and philosophy, and I did my master's and my PhD in educational psychology. The thread throughout all of my research has been procrastination.

In the last year of my undergraduate degree, I worked with one of the leading researchers on procrastination. His name is Dr. Timothy Mitchell and I worked with him on a project on procrastination, and I completely fell in love with the [00:04:00] construct of procrastination and this idea that we say we're going to do something.

And we truly believe it when we say it, but somehow we don't end up doing it. And that question kind of stayed in my head, like how, how does this keep happening? So I spent all of my study doing research on this construct, trying to understand what's going on. And, there's a lot going on that I can talk about throughout the podcast today,

By research findings and the research findings in general, I think can help people in a lot of different ways. The research looks at the underlying processes of procrastination, the reasons for procrastination what's related to procrastination, and the emotions that students experience when they procrastinate.

As Pascale mentioned, we have guilt and anxiety being huge players. And I can talk about that if you'd like, and there's a lot going on.

Pascale: So we've got, you can start with the basics. Can you, define procrastination and what it is not, because I guess it's my sense that people might confuse what really procrastination is.

Sonia: Yes, they do. And I did as well. So, one of my favorite quotes, it [00:05:00] actually comes from Dr. Mitchell, who I worked with. He says that all procrastination is a delay, but not all delay is a procrastination. So the formal definition of procrastination comes from a paper in 2007 by a researcher by the name of Steele, where this researcher kind of took all these different definitions of procrastination and put them together and came up with the following, which is: procrastination is defined as a needless delay of unintended action, despite possible negative consequences. And the key word here is needless. So this is an example that I love because it happens to me all the time. I make a plan in my agenda where Friday night, I'm going to read this chapter of X book. I'm going to read it to Friday night.

Pascale: Sorry, why Friday night? It seems like....

Sonia: Ok fine, Monday night, let's go with Monday night because that we can know why you didn't do it.

Yeah. Okay. So here's the [00:06:00] example. Um, Monday night – I make a plan on my agenda that Monday night I am going to read chapter three of my textbook. Monday night rolls around. I go look at my textbook and I'm like, you know what... I don't want to do this. I turn on Netflix or what's even worse, sometimes I turn on Netflix. I'm like, I'll just watch one episode. And the next time I look at the clock, it's six hours later and I'm like, what just happened? I intended on doing something and I didn't end up doing it. And that's something else that's really critical to the definition of procrastination, is that there's an intention that you have, but the action doesn't actually align with that intention.

And this is what the research has called the intention action gap. But I want to make a point here that what I did was needless. I could have studied, but I was just like, eh, I don't want to do this. I'm going to go do something else. And delay is very different. Delay is you're making a conscious choice to delay something because something else comes up, [00:07:00] your schedule moves around.

We can't control everything sometimes. And I think a lot of people tend to be really hard on themselves when they're actually in a situation where life happened and things had to be moved around and it wasn't actually procrastination. So they feel unnecessary guilt when I don't think they should.

I think the guilt attached to procrastination really is when you did something needless, like watch TV or scroll on your phone for six hours or something where you didn't actually end up doing what you wanted to work on.

Pascale: I love that you say needless, because so often in sessions, I recommend to people to think when they're there, when they're struggling, to close their eyes and think, what do I need right now?

And sometimes they're hungry, something there's thirsty. Someone said they have to go pee because you know, clerks tend to forget to go pee, doctors do. And sometimes we do need to watch a show. And I think that's kind of like the thing, like needless. Sometimes Netflix is that thing that you needed, you needed to kind of [00:08:00] disconnect and like be in a different world, but you needed a break.

But sometimes we need to exercise and sometimes when the need is always Netflix, then I think maybe then sometimes it doesn't like, did you ever watch Netflix and feel like, Ugh, that didn't make me feel better. And often that is because that is not what you needed. You needed something else that you might have avoided or you kind of like, you didn't really connect with your need. So

Netflix is not always like, it's a big example, but then that night, that Monday night, sometimes the need is to go out to dinner with your best friend, because you had a really tough day. And the best thing you can do on that Monday night is to go to that dinner because you need to just be yourself and have time because you need to have social time and what you don't really need to study on that night.

Am I getting this right? Sonia?

Sonia: Yes, absolutely. And what's interesting is I published a paper this year, it's in the journal of personality and individual differences, where I looked at the relationships between [00:09:00] students' passion, students' emotions and students' procrastination. And I also looked at their passion and their emotions for another activity that they love.

And what I found, which I think is really interesting, is that a specific type of passion, which is called harmonious passion. That involves being passionate for an activity that is in harmony with the rest of your life. So for example, some people said playing guitar, or, you know, sports or painting or something else that they enjoy doing that was outside of their studies.

If you are harmoniously passionate for that activity, meaning that that activity is in harmony with your life. You're not really obsessed with it. It's just something you enjoy doing. That's not something that's contingent on your self-esteem or anything that's really pressuring you. If you are harmoniously passionate for that other thing, and you engage in it, that makes you have positive emotions in your studies.

Which leads to less procrastination. So having something else that you enjoy doing that is a part of your life actually leads to less [00:10:00] procrastination through positive emotions on your studies. And I think it's because you feel like you get that break. You get that break, you're doing something, and then you come back to your work and you're more excited about your work.

Elizabeth: So can I translate that into sort of like basic terms? what you're saying is have have a hobby or have a thing you like to do. That's not just school. Exactly. And that's not necessarily just CV building activity, but have something that's just for you.

Sonia: Yes, exactly. And, and an activity that you're passionate about that is integrated into your life. That's not just your school.

Pascale: I can imagine the listeners thinking now I have permission to do painting. I have permission to, to go knitting because that can actually help me, increase the quality of the work when I do engage in it.

I'm also going to hear this and smile, and I'm also hearing people are like, Ooh, I don't have that. I don't get a hobby or I lost touch with my hobbies. So not so much. [00:11:00] Yep. I used to read, they say this, some students will say I used to play guitar or I used to be in choir and they'll tell me this sort of wistful of, and now I'm going to think like, okay, I'm in the middle of clerkship, no way I'm going to do this again, because they tend to want to do it all, like take choir completely again, or like be the best guitar player or like, it'd be, be great again. But so now, any, any thoughts?

Sonia: Oh, well, this happened to me, so I, I was asked once, you know, what are your hobbies?

And I sat there and I was like, I don't, I used to play piano. I used to, I started listing off things I used to do, as you said. And all of a sudden I was like, oh my gosh, all my time is going to my studies. And it really was a shock, but it was a shock that I needed to hear. I needed to hear it because it kind of made me reflect, okay, well, what else do I want in my life?

Where, where else, what, what else is important for me? What else do I value? What else is part of the person I want to be? And it really [00:12:00] kind of guided me to other hobbies. I got my keyboard back. I started playing again and started to kind of integrate other things into my life. That wasn't just my studies.

Pascale: And I'm going to dare to say that when engaging in those hobbies or these things that we're passionate about is actually fuel for everything else, because what I'm hearing from learners is that they're depleted.

They have it sometimes it's like at the end of the day, I have nothing left to give. I give all day and I have nothing left. So it's about finding what refuels you, and that can be so different for everyone. And that is a key question. I'm going to ask you right now, the people who are listening, what refuels you and what are you going to do about it?

And then can you protect five minutes today? You know, five minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes. I'll remember that for me. I have a client who used [00:13:00] to, who came to see him and this person was telling me how difficult it was for them to go out and exercise.

And I remember like at the end of our session, I was like, go for five minutes, go for five minutes right now. And then, this person came back two weeks later. And this person said, Pascale, I went for five minutes and it was the best. And then went for six minutes. The next day, I listened to your advice because I usually have to do it all. You know, it's either all or nothing. And then, by you telling me to go five minutes, I went and it felt so much better. And now I've been going for 15 and it feels great.

And I did share with this person a bit later on in our sessions, but I was like, I felt so guilty because I had been procrastinating..

Elizabeth: Like you, yourself, Pascale?

Pascale: Like, yes, you tell this person and then this, it worked for this person, but you haven't gone for five minutes and yes, you have three [00:14:00] children.

There's always a really good excuse for it to not exercise. So that day I felt like, okay, I need to walk the talk. I, so I, I want for five minutes and I started, I started running again and now I'm saying this because it's been a long time. And, I thought when I was doing it, I'm never not going to do this again.

It feels so good. And it's been months it's been since like, it's been months, I haven't done it. So all that to say it is hard and sometimes we need a little push and sometimes we need to start with five minutes, right?

Elizabeth: Can I ask a question to Sonia about like a, kind of a personal question, Sonia, actually you're an expert on procrastination and you did a graduate degree. You did a PhD about this topic. Did, did you procrastinate during your PhD? And if you did, how did you catch yourself doing it?

Sonia: It, it's so interesting. Knowing what I know and, you know, every day I'm reading these articles and I'm talking to other researchers and it's, it's so interesting, [00:15:00] conceptually understanding procrastination, and then it happens and I started feeling embarrassed and I'm like, Nope, hang on a second. You have to pause.

You have to reflect on your emotions. That's what the article said. And I'm trying really hard to incorporate what I know from the literature into my own life. But I think the, um, a lot of the techniques that I can talk about, if we do want to talk about tips and tricks, I use them on myself all the time and that's the way I was able to figure it out.

But the biggest thing for me was, my research is a lot of it is on emotions and procrastination, and I can see it in my own life when I start to feel anxious about something and I put it aside.

Pascale: So now please tell us why do people procrastinate?

Sonia: Well, there are many different theories out there, a lot of the literature says that the two main reasons that people procrastinate have to do with, fear of failure and task aversiveness. So task aversiveness is essentially a dislike for the task that they're [00:16:00] doing. They feel bored doing the task. They don't like it, or a fear of failure, which is a lot of it's tied to emotions. I read a paper recently, actually it was with medical students and they found that the number one reason for procrastination with medical students was low confidence.

So sort of related to, a fear of failure. And self-esteem, it depends on how the researchers classify the terms used, but I would put it in the same group of a self-esteem type of issue. But there is an interesting theory that I really like where, they talk about procrastination in terms of self-regulation failure.

So as I mentioned before, procrastination involves this intention action gap where you think or say you're going to do something and then you don't do it. And researchers say that there's two reasons. The first is something called under regulation, which essentially just means that you don't have the skills to get the job done.

You haven't learned time management skills, you haven't learned self-regulation skills. The second camp, which is [00:17:00] something that I believe in, and I've experienced myself – it's more about your emotions that you experienced to when you go to approach a task. So if you do have a fear of failure and you go to pick up your book on Monday night to read your chapters that you said you would do, you're sitting there and you're thinking I can't do this.

Maybe I'm going to fail. Something's going on. You start feeling hopeless perhaps, or maybe anxiety or all these negative emotions. So you put, you close the books and you go watch. What that does is your negative emotions. They're stuck in that book that you just closed and you went to watch TV, which gives you positive emotions.

But the problem with this is that you didn't actually get rid of your negative emotions. They're still sitting there in that book. So when you go back to read it the night before the exam, what's going to happen, not only are those negative emotions coming back, they're amplified. So you, you shifted the burden and

the stress and the anxiety from that moment to right before the deadline, which is [00:18:00] why some people feel this urge of motivation, right before a deadline, because they have all these negative emotions going on and the rushing to get the job done

Pascale: and feel like you just said, you just described how so many people are feeling when they need to study. And I'm almost speechless because I think you've nailed it head on. You said what I think a lot of students are experiencing I guess the first thing is to realize that you're doing it when it is happening.

So a goal right now would be like, what is happening when you are about to procrastinate or you're experiencing negative emotion. Aversiveness because you're bored. I think that's kind of coming up a lot, you know, like I'm in a rotation that I don't really care about, but I do want to do well.

I want it, you know, I don't really care about this rotation, so it makes it even harder. And also fear of failure. I hear this all the time. So what can they do.

Sonia: I have strategies for both of the things I said, the one where you don't have the skills [00:19:00] necessarily. And if you have the problems with negative emotions and personally, I don't think it's one or the other.

I think it's both. You know, if you don't have time management skills, but you're not anxious, you're still potentially going to have problems, procrastination. So when it comes to the skills that you need, I definitely think that understanding your goals, having realistic goals, having a time management plan set up for you or something that you can do in your life.

I can give a personal example. So I used to plan my weeks out, and I would create a to-do a list. I'd say today, I'm going to do three things. And I go to my list and I'd be like, okay, these three things are kind of easy. You know what? I'm just going to go do something else for now and come back to it a couple hours later.

And lo and behold, it took me nine hours to do. And I'm thinking, oh my gosh, what just happened? How did I make this mistake? Like, I really thought these things wouldn't take me that long. I procrastinated and I got the [00:20:00] consequences. I had no evening that night. I had to finish those things. So then I thought, well, what else can I do?

And again, going back to what I've read and how I've implemented into my life, I found out about time-blocking and time blocking requires you to estimate how

long a task is actually going to take you. So all of a sudden, it wasn't just a to-do list. It was a to-do list with a time attached to it. So I would estimate, for example, this task will take me an hour and I could have still made a mistake, right.

Even doing that. So I leave a little bit of time and another place, a 30 minute block here and there, which I call risk. It's a little block where if something else didn't get done, I try and fit it in, of course it's not perfect, but it's a lot better than that night where I had to work into middle of the night.

So using strategies that are scientific or we can say practical are very, very useful, but again, the awareness of your emotions is what I think has helped me the most, being able to pause and think, okay, what's going on? Why did I just pick up my phone that has revolutionized my [00:21:00] life? Why did I just pick up my phone and randomly start scrolling?

What should this happen? And I sit there and I'm like, okay, you're nervous about this talk. Or maybe you're nervous. This section of this paper, let's just break it down into smaller steps. And then I give myself smaller goals and , before I know it, it's it's, the project is done. So that's something that's really helped me.

And , it's a process, right? It's not something that I'm just gonna magically be great at. I'm always working on both the time management component and the awareness of negative emotions and positive emotions to why do I enjoy this task particularly? How do I incorporate this morning to my life?

And I think at the end of the day, it touches on something else we spoke about too, but something that's really important is also taking those breaks and recognizing the role of self-care. Because if, if you don't take those breaks and you're not taking care of yourself, you're going to have even more negative emotions and negative self-talk and a lot of things that aren't really gonna serve you towards your goals, because all your effort is going to go to [00:22:00] maintaining your negative emotions.

Elizabeth: We'll say, if you put it in your calendar, you're going to do. Right. Put it in your calendar. So scenario hypothetical, nobody. I know, certainly not me. We put it in my calendar, lunch from 12 to 1. I look at it here it is. Here's my lunch break. That's still a cash flow after that 40 minutes. All right. I feel good.

After about 30 minutes, I can still get a run in. Oh, I've still got 25 minutes. I've got 20 minutes. I can't possibly go. So what's that about?

Sonia: Do you enjoy the tasks that you're working on?

Elizabeth: Absolutely. Oh, sometimes it depends on the day.

Sonia: Because there's a concept called flow where we get lost in what we're doing.

So that's possible, but I think there's so many ways that people have spun procrastination in a positive way. There's researchers out there who would say, that's a good thing. You're getting your work done that you want it to get done, but there's a consequence attached to not eating. And there's a consequence attached, not exercise.

And there's consequences [00:23:00] attached to these things. And in a way you just have to pick what consequences you want. Do you want to be a little bit behind on your work or do you want to take care of yourself? It depends on the perspective you

Pascale: want to take. So it sounds like it's about prioritizing.

What is most important at this time right now. And sometimes I think it's about making that conscious decision. That right now I am skipping lunch with an intention that this is what I'm deciding on doing and not like a force of things, because then if you are, for example, skipping, lunch, working, and then you're saying that you're burned out and you never get to eat.

And you're so depleted. It's like, well, you know this about yourself, so something does need to change. And this is about kind of realizing that we are making decisions every minute of the day. And it's about prioritizing. And it's about wondering, like, what is the most important for me right now?

Does that make sense? So this was when I say that. Thanks. So, yeah, I think so. And it sounds like the way you're [00:24:00] describing it, Elizabeth, it sounds like, there's a level of function. Like how much has this happened and how much it's affecting you?

Elizabeth: What I'm hearing is that people are saying that their inner voice or their, the way they, they push themselves is that it's never good enough. And

that's the thing, like if you're waiting to go for a lunch and feel satisfied with the amount of work you've done, then you might never eat.

Because if you're hard on yourself, if you are critical, you won't, you will never get to the, the fun part. You will never get to the break. If the break is conditional on a certain level of performance, then you might be, you know, shooting, yourself in the foot. Does that resonate with you?

Sonia: A hundred percent, I'm working on a systematic review right now of medical students, wellbeing, stress, and procrastination, and so many papers. I see the relationship between all these variables and perfectionism, which I think is a lot of that feeling of nothing's ever good enough.

It has to be perfect or it's not right. And especially in these [00:25:00] highly competitive settings, I think it completely makes sense that we have this. Unfortunately, it's an ideal that we, we can't really hit sometimes and we feel depleted as a consequence of it, but it, like you said, the priority is, is what I think need to change.

We need to make sure that self care... and also I've said this a lot, but self-compassion is in there because when we are hard on ourselves, what ends up happening is we don't meet a certain goal. And then we have negative self-talk and rumination, which then deplete us even more because those require cognitive load.

And then before we know it, we're tired at the end of the day and we don't want to do anything. So I think self-compassion is really important.

Pascale: Okay. And then instead of having this internal dialogue, that's encouraging your internal dialogue is extra self critical, and then you're hungry for people to be nice to you.

You know, you're hungry for people to give you the motivation. You're hungry for that positive feedback because [00:26:00] inside you feel horrible, you don't feel worthy. You don't feel good enough. And you're looking for external validation. It becomes really intense then self-compassion is about saying like, wait, instead of waiting for others to make you feel good about yourself, because often it doesn't work.

If your external validation has a limit. If you are so hard on yourself inside then. You're sabotaging any kind of positive feedback you can get. Sonya, can you

tell us a bit more about self-compassion and how people can go about kind of applying it in their daily life,

Sonia: For sure. Again, that negative self-talk is critical to procrastination as well, because part of the reason we put our books aside is to say, oh, I can't do this and I'm not good enough. And I might as well just not even try. But when it comes to self compassion, I think the most important thing is that awareness.

And I call it the pausing. You pause while something's happening, you just reflect on how do I feel right now? [00:27:00] What's going on. And instead of answering those questions with, oh, what's going on is I can't do this and I'm not good enough. You answer it differently. And you say, this is just a moment of suffering and.

It's okay. Maybe I made a mistake, maybe this isn't going to be exactly what I want it to be, but we're human and these things happen and everybody feels like this, so it's okay to not have it be perfect. But the key, I think, is that pausing. Cause it's such a fleeting moment before you're already down a rabbit hole of negative self-talk and you've closed all your books and you don't want to do anything.

So I think that the most important thing is taking that moment to reflect on where you are and remembering your values also.

Pascale: I love that you want to talk about values, but I kind of want to be devil's advocate here and be like, some people are holding onto this critical self-talk as if that was their main source of performance.

It's like, if they start, if I'm not hard on myself, like, will I ever get up in the morning? I'm not ever going to do anything.

Sonia: The problem is though, is that [00:28:00] when we do those things again, there's a bunch of things that come along with it. There's negative emotions. There's like procrastination, for example, like people get away with it all the time.

Like you guys mentioned, and they're happy to do it because they get away with it. But the problem is, is they have more problems with negative emotions. They have more visits to health care professionals. They have a lot of problems that come with it. So yes, you can use negative self-talk, but where else is that bleeding into your life?

And what else are you missing out on? Because you're so focused on just making sure you get that one thing done through this negative lens that you've put on your life instead of the joy that could come from, you know, feeling pride after you get something done instead of burning out and feeling joy while you do the process, instead of anxiety, trying to finish it as quickly as possible, because you have a lot of other things.

And I want to be clear here. I understand people are very busy and it's really hard sometimes to get this all done in the way that we want to, but I think it's about the process and trying our best to [00:29:00] take those moments and not be mean to ourselves, which again, with...

Pascale: It's hard. And I think, I think there's a double standard.

When you catch yourself in that pause that you're talking about, would you ever speak like that to someone you love? Would you ever be that harsh? And often when I asked this question to go that no, I would never talk like that to anybody. And this is a topic that we have a full podcast dedicated to self-compassion if you feel twinkled

what's the word twinkle. If you feel tickled right now, please do take another 40 minutes of your time to listen to the south, compassion podcast, on the well office. 'Cause it's a big topic that I actually have to say. I talk about on a daily basis, with some many, many of the learners who come through my door for counseling appointments.

So would you ever talk like that to anybody else? And I think that's kind of like a big one. And when we're talking about [00:30:00] procrastination,

Can I say though that when we think about the stress groups that we need some stress to perform, we need some pressure we need a bit of is the, to actually get things done. So I think the recipe works, but it has a limit. Yes. Pressure makes us. But kind of like a normal distribution.

It goes down. If you push too much, then you do, you're leading yourself to burnout. And I think often when people are coming through our doors or the people who are struggling or who are defining procrastination and lack of motivation as a struggle then off then they're on the other side of that stress curve where they pushed too much.

And then if they keep ongoing burnout, anxiety, suicidal ideation, those are things that we hear about, unfortunately on a daily basis. So if we kind of think

about, of that relation of stress versus performance, it's about putting less stress on yourself. So can you be kinder [00:31:00] to yourself?

Can you actually be the voice that you would like to hear from?

Sonia: Exactly. There's some new research out. It was published last year and it was with medical, where they did a mixed methods approach, where they asked students about their stress levels and they asked them questions about how they perceive their stress, how they react to their stress and how they cope with their stress.

And they found that 65% of medical students scored above accepted norms of stress, which I think is really interesting. It's very weird to me.

Pascale: Yeah. A little bit. Did you understand Elizabeth 65% of medical students score above the norm for accepted levels of stress? And my joke was, seems low to me.

Um, I think many meds, 65%.

Sonia: That's what they found. But, what, I thought was interesting is when they asked the students, why, are you stressed? They said, exams was one of the top reasons. And within explaining why exams [00:32:00] was one of the top reasons they mentioned procrastination. And then they also mentioned work-life balance and time management.

Then they asked students, how do you react when you're stressed? And they mentioned anxiety, procrastination, again, huge player here. And then when they asked them, how do you cope with your stress? One of the most reported coping strategies was doing a non-academic activity, which helped them with their stress.

So I think that curve you're talking about with the, you know, you're going too far on the side of, towards burnout, that going back to what we were talking about before having that non-academic activity. Help push us back a little bit so that the motivation isn't essentially so obsessive and so rigid with that one task and it takes over our lives.

Elizabeth: Can I, make a scenario again? So the scenario I have in mind is... so it's first year you're in first year, I'm more familiar. I'm a bit more familiar with medical students. I'll go with medical students in their first year and the first half of the year, their motivations high they're on top of their tasks.[00:33:00]

And as the year goes along and we come to January, February, March, April summer is looming. They're kind of tired. The days have been long, the motivation to get on top of tasks is much, much lower. And I know med students at least tend to put, start putting things off and off and off as the year gets closer to the end.

I wonder what you think might be useful for a student to manage that.

Sonia: I think it depends on a couple of things. I think in some cases, medical students do get overwhelmed because there's just a lot of tasks and they, it's not possible to manage all of it. And that goes exactly, and in that case, I think that goes back to the discussion about delay prioritizing. And self-compassion just understanding, you know, what, sometimes this is out of my control and I'm just going to try my best to do my best. But in some other cases, sometimes people take on too many things and they have to learn to say no to certain things if they can, but it really depends on if, how much of it is in their [00:34:00] control and how they can allocate their time and trying to fit in those little five minute self care breaks, I think is huge.

Pascale: There's really something about expectations. I think it's about managing expectations in medical school. And you know, a lot of the health, professional trainings they say that it's like drinking from a fire hose. It's meant to spill. Basically. There's no way you can learn it all.

So if you beat yourself up for not being able to manage it all, then it's about finding a way to actually realize that this is really hard. And what can you do about it, it's focusing on the things that are in your control. It's about focusing on things that, you can do to cope in this really difficult situation.

And sometimes it's about giving yourself a break, you know, giving yourself that time and reflection. And sometimes it can be helpful to meet Elizabeth and myself to talk about, like, I feel like I'm, I kinda in a very rough spot, because often there might be some things about like, I'm afraid of what's coming next, then maybe I'd go career [00:35:00] kind of question.

Like I'm afraid of CaRMS. I feel this is too much. I'm having kind of a questioning about like, can I continue? Is this really, what I want to do is if there's a career component, but often. There's a personal component. There's something going on in your personal life that makes it even harder for you to focus on the tasks that you signed up for because the honeymoon phase is over, you got in now you have to do the work and they can be really hard.

And also what I'm hearing is that people are realizing as they enter healthcare professions that they're saying like, this is a really big responsibility. And sometimes there might be something existential dropping on them. It's like, this is what I signed up for. And this is kind of like, I'll be a learner for the rest of my life maybe.

And that can be a bit daunting that there's no end, you know, does that make sense, Elizabeth? When I say.

Elizabeth: Actually. Yeah. Especially, when you, you mentioned the word CaRMS and if you don't mind, I'll just take that and run with it for a second. So something that stresses the fourth year students very much as this whole thing called CaRMS, which is a sort of an eight month [00:36:00] process of getting matched to a residency program of their choice.

And it's a big application process, and there's a lot of things that they have to do, many, many tasks, admin tasks, paperwork, tasks, creative writing tasks, blah-blah-blah preparation tasks. It's so many tasks, and they look at this big pizza and think I can't possibly eat the whole thing. I can't do it.

I just can't it's too much. One of the things that sometimes I do when I talk to the students is they come and they tell me, Elizabeth, I just, I haven't started anything with CaRMS and the deadline's coming and I just, I have, what do I do? So we'll go, okay. I know this is going to sound very mema, and I'm sorry.

It's very basic, but I'm okay. Let's make a list. Seriously. Let's make a list. So we, we start, we sit, we make a list. Number one, number one, tie your shoes, but no number one, number two, all the way down through number nine. And then we look at the list and we say, which are the, which are the stupid tasks, the little ones that take no mental energy whatsoever that are just, you can, you can do it in five minutes, cross it off the list.

And we put a circle around those ones and it's literally things like, you know, [00:37:00] request your transcript. You just go on your Minerva and you typically type in a few codes, press send boom done, and it's one task off. So we make the list and we scratch them off one at a time, starting from easiest. And then leaving the more complicated ones for later.

Pascale: Can I give it twice on that? Because what I say, the hardest things I often say to people, keep it for when you're in your prime time, we all have a time when like, because when we're tired do the easy stuff, but knowing when your prime time is and then do it, the hard stuff then.

So now, do, what do you think?

Sonia: I completely agree, completely read there's research out there that talks about, our temperature changes throughout the day and everybody's different. I've tried to read about it a little bit and I've found for myself, for example, the afternoon, I'm more tired than the morning.

So I leave my writing tasks for the morning and then if, the little other things I do in the afternoon. If I can, of course, this is all in a world where we can plan our time. Sometimes we can't, so we have to adjust,

Pascale: and I think that's kind of like, there's no perfect recipe like some people sometimes [00:38:00] are night owls and their prime time is in the middle of the night.

And in the first year, you know, you can get away with it in third and fourth year, maybe not. But sometimes I say like, the target, what your goal that's realistic for now. And I'm thinking that sometimes it's about, like you said, blocking time and being realistic about it. And also, putting pressure on yourself to actually do the thing.

Like say, if you can spend two hours writing a draft for your motivation letter or whatever, is that daunting thing that you actually really don't want to do, give yourself a candy after, or do something that you, you watched that movie that guilty pleasure that you've been wanting to watch, but you know, whatever.

Giving yourself the reward. So it's going to be, didn't play with your mind. I personally, when I do my client notes, I changed a color in my calendar. Like I have, my calendar is full of appointments and it's kind of like every end of appointment, every time I am done with the session, I changed the color and it makes me feel so good to look at the purple pink, you know, after, because I'm like, I feel satisfied.

So [00:39:00] knowing what will make you feel motivated, and I have to say, there's no magic one. This is hard. This is so hard. And this is difficult. And then hopefully today you're learning, or hearing some of the tips. Hopefully you feel validated.

Hopefully you feel like you're not alone. But I think something we have to remember is that there's no magic solution. It's about finding what works for you, but also having the courage to change. And sometimes I ask, well, do you

really want to change? And how long will you wait to change? And, it can be, it can be quite difficult.

Sonia: There's two things I wanted to actually mention, piggybacking off of what you just said, that I've learned throughout my life and research and everything in general. The first one is I think people wait for motivation. They wait for it to come. And unfortunately that's not how it works. Starting the task is actually what motivates you.

You started a little bit and before you know it, you're in it just a couple minutes. This works with exercises works by academic tasks. So waiting for motivation has been something I don't do anymore. [00:40:00] And, that's also related to something called emotional forecasting where we tell ourselves, oh, I'll feel like doing, doing it tomorrow.

Well, if you don't feel like doing it now, you're probably not going to feel like doing it tomorrow. And we're actually horrible at forecasting how we're going to feel the next day. So again, just try a couple minutes and see how it goes, is a huge thing for me. And one more thing, going back to self.

Something that I have been really, really trying to incorporate into my life as well is if you tell yourself that you're going to get a coffee after you do this two hour task, go actually, and get that coffee. Don't just forget about it. After you finished the task, because what happens is you, you kind of just lied to yourself.

So the next time you set yourself up to do a task, you won't trust that you're actually going to get yourself that reward. So I think it's important to remember, to validate yourself in that way as well.

Elizabeth: It's like training a dog. They'll only get if you actually give them the treat. Right?

Sonia: And another thing too, is isn't to be all or nothing. Right. We just, just try it.

Pascale: So now we actually have a question from a student [00:41:00] who would like to know if you have any advice, any tips on how to be motivated.

When heartbroken or when you're burnt out or when you're not doing well. And I think that's a big thing. It feels like we answered, but I would like to get to spend more time validating that sometimes we are not, well, sometimes we're heartbroken, sometimes we are not okay.

But there are still things that need to be done. So can we, can we just spend a little bit of time on that?

Sonia: Of course. I think, I think it depends. I think sometimes we self-sabotage ourselves and in contexts where we're not well, because we don't believe in ourselves.

A lot of the tips and tricks would be about reflection and trying to build our own confidence and trying to, you know, a lot of the stuff we already talked about self-compassion and things like that. But sometimes when external things are happening around us, a part of me wants to play my own devil's advocate right now and say, well, why do we need to be motivated all the time?

Maybe it's okay to have a moment [00:42:00] where we're not motivated and we're taking a, not, not a break, but we're positive.

Elizabeth: You see you're phoning it in. When you say you just doing the bare minimum. All I can do is the bare minimum right now. Yeah, yeah.

Sonia: Yeah.

Pascale: I think there's something about, I don't have to be great at all times, or I can, I allow myself to feel what I'm feeling and especially for when you're feeling heartbroken, that's actually one of the main reasons people come see us at the WELL Office for counseling sessions, is that there's a personal relationship difficulty. And what they tend to do is avoid thinking about it.

But then there's a paradox. The more you don't want to think about something, the more you'll think about it. That's how it works. So. When you are not motivated to study because you're heartbroken, then maybe the tip is to say, allow yourself to suffer, allow yourself to feel. And by doing that by giving space to your [00:43:00] emotion, eventually that's how you will think less about it.

Does that make sense?

Sonia: So now, yeah, I completely agree with that. I don't think we always have to be a hundred percent on our jobs or tasks. That's not real life. Real life has these moments, whether it's burnout from something or a personal relationship problem. I think we have to attend to those things because it will harm you in your work if you don't

Pascale: and maybe sometimes it takes five minutes if it happened.

And then I can hear a student saying like, yeah, like I'm in the middle of clerkship, I'm super busy. Or like, there's no way I can give myself time to breathe. Or like, if I open this, I will not be able to close it. And it's interesting because I can say that in therapy sessions, sometimes at the end.

After we actually do dig into the pain and the suffering and like, we did the opposite of what I've been wanting to do, but I do feel lighter and sometimes I'll dare to say, you can go to the bathroom, use water, use your breathing, use Headspace, use whatever you need. You can, always fake a visit to the bathroom.

No one's like, well, you've been in the [00:44:00] bathroom for 10 minutes. That's not supposed to happen. That can be your safe haven. When you feel stuck, there's always a bathroom, the use of water, or take off your mask, run water on your face in your hands and give yourself permission to feel and cry if you need to cry, take 10 minutes and then go back to it because that 10 minutes is going to be a good investment because you're probably going to be way more able to attend to others after having attended to ourselves. And if that doesn't work, then maybe something bigger is happening and maybe shouldn't be at work.

So if after 10 minutes after giving yourself that many breaks, you are not feeling better. Maybe that's saying that you need more time. You know, you actually are not able to take care of others because you're not in a good space. And that happens to all of us.

Sonia: I agree.

Pascale: So we have to end soon and I want to make sure that Elizabeth, where are you going to say something?

Elizabeth: No, I know I was just really [00:45:00] reflecting. Actually. I went quiet there because I was reflecting very much on what you last said.

Pascale: What resonated with me?

Elizabeth: The business of being most able to help someone else once you've attended to yourself. And I know this whole talk was about, you know, not procrastinating and being a good person and things like this, but really that, that seems so key. It seems so central to everything that Sonia has been saying.

Pascale: Yeah.

Sonia: I think even if we're talking about priorities, like that should be our priority.

Elizabeth: Not always putting that off. Oh, procrastinating on self-care. Wow, exactly. Yeah. And it can I, just notice that you said “should”, Sonia, yes. Guilty if you don't like, so could we replace this should with need, I need to put myself first.

Does that resonate with you Sonia? When I say yes, yes. For sure.

Sonia: For sure. We need to put our self care first or at least one [00:46:00] of our top priorities.

Pascale: Where is this now? And it's, difficult yet needed. And I am noticing that the more we do it, the easier. And the more accessible it is.

And I do think that in a way you are in a very difficult culture. The learning environment is challenging. There's a lot of pressure, and it feels like there's no time for you then who will help them if you're no longer there, you know, and how efficient is it for you to take a whole year off because you're that burnt out, when maybe it could have been two hours a week for the last four years, then that make sense? Because sometimes people delay or procrastinate on their self care and end up being so burned out that they eventually do take care of themselves in a big chunk with the leave.

Elizabeth: Can't be avoided. If that happens. That means there was no putting it off anymore. At that point it happened.

Sonia: And in a way, going back to when we first talked about the difference between delay and procrastination, I would say [00:47:00] procrastination is the needless putting off of frivolous things here and there, whereas delay is you put something off intentionally to fit in the things that are important in your life. Like self care.

Pascale: With this definition, I'm going to dare to say that most students who are listening to this podcast are masters of delay and not masters of procrastination, because there's so much that you do, you are doing so much, you are being very efficient. You are getting so much done.

Elizabeth: It blows my mind how much they get done.

Pascale: So continue what you're doing and allow yourself to delay. Label.. what you.. procrastination... If you could take from this, that labeling, what you're doing as is a delay is a procrastination and realizing that you probably are delaying because you are learning to prioritize different things and you are creating your new identity as a [00:48:00] health professional.

And that is a long journey and you're in the midst of it and it's difficult. And, we're here to support you all along. This is how would like to add our podcast for today is really by thanking you Sonia, thank you, Elizabeth, for your stories. And, maybe parting words. Like Sonia, I would like you to kind of like maybe take the last few words of like what you're hoping people are going to learn from this, and maybe your, your words of wisdom as we, as we part.

Sonia: I think I would say we all procrastinate and we all delay and it's okay to change your priorities. It's okay to change your schedule. This is a fluid process and we're all just trying our best, but, there is a cost associated with dismissing our own self-care and I think it's important to remember that we matter.

And we have to remember who we are, what our values are, try to cut out the noise that is this negative self-talk and put [00:49:00] ourselves in the best position to be the best people, doctors, students that we want to be.

Pascale: Comme c'est bien dit Sonia. Merci énormément pour tous ces mots très encourageant. Merci Elizabeth, comme toujours. C'est un plaisir à travailler avec toi. Merci à tous les étudiants... and until next time, thank you everyone.