



CHAPTER EXTRACT: OVERCOMING PERFECTIONISM AND PROCRASTINATION

How to Re-Frame the Self-Doubt, Reduce the Anxiety and Trick the Lizard Brain

Risk reframing and risk mitigation techniques.

Take the risk away – without dropping your standards.

This is not about lowering your high standards. *Far from it.*

This is about making a shift in your mindset where your self-worth and self-evaluation is not linked to how well you are measuring up against impossible high standards, which in most cases are self-imposed.

As soon as you catch yourself seeking avoidance activities, and new shiny distractions when you know you should be working on a project, stand back and recognise the symptoms. Analyse why you are putting things off.

Stage #1

Write down on paper the sequence of events and thoughts and feelings you have when you are hit with a crisis of confidence and cannot make a decision or move forward in some way.

Like it or not, we invest a lot of our self-worth into every project that we work on. When someone gives us a bad review or rejects our work, it chips away at our self-esteem and knocks our confidence.

Procrastination is one way of protecting ourselves from that pain.

Worked Example: Imagine you are building up the courage to send a submission package for your novel to a literary agent.

This is your first full length novel and until now the only people to have read it are your two pals who agreed to be beta-readers.

Suddenly the whole submission process spins into overwhelm and takes over your life.

You had no idea you would feel physically sick with emotional turmoil at the thought that someone else is going to judge this book you have slaved over and cared about for years.

What if it is rejected? What if they ask for a full manuscript? And how long will you have to wait for a reply?

This is driving you crazy! Submitting this book has been on your New Year resolution list for two years running. You have rewritten the text through two NaNoWriMo [National Novel Writing in a Month] sessions, edited the third draft and incorporated the feedback from all of your pals.

The manuscript is as good as it can be. In fact you are sick of looking at it.

Worse. You know the longer you delay, the greater the chance that the market will have moved on. Your teen mermaid romance was hot news last year and it can take up to 18 months for publishers to release a hardback print run. That's a geological era in the book world of today.

You want to live up to your potential but you don't want this pressure and stress.

Because: Your internal self-talk is telling you that you are not good enough and that your work is not ready to be judged by anyone. You need to keep working on it.

“If I don't submit, then I won't be judged. I would rather be called slow and lazy than be rejected.”

Because: Your excuses are building up every day. You have read that a writer needs to have an author platform before they can submit to an agent or self-publish, but you don't have a website and only a few followers on social media. This is too hard. Don't bother. In fact, just forget about the whole thing. You were stupid to even think that anyone would want to read your stories anyway.

Which results in: You see yourself as a failure. You berate yourself for giving in too easily and you start being supercritical of everything you do, going over and over the same things in your head every day.

Which results in: You keep putting off your writing because the process is now linked to a false memory of anxiety and stress.

Now it is decision time.

#1. Send the submission to the literary agent *today*, or

#2. Forget about the whole thing and let all of that work and an amazing story stay locked inside your computer or stuffed into a box file.

Write down your sequence of events in this way and start to look for the patterns in what you have recorded and how each piece fits together.

Stage #2

Worst Case Risk Assessment and Correction Strategies

In his book *Tools of Titans*, author entrepreneur Tim Ferriss goes into depth on a technique that he calls **Fear Setting**. In the business world this process would be called **Risk Analysis and Mitigation**.

The basic concept is quite simple.

You identify what it is you are scared of doing, write down all of the worst possible negative outcomes that could happen if you went for it, then, one by one, you take the power away from each of these imaginary negative scenarios by describing how you can reduce the impact of that possible outcome and get back to baseline again.

Select one project that you have been putting off.

Take a pad of [preferably ruled] paper and draw two lines down the page so that it is divided into three columns.

1. In the first column, write down all of the very worst things that could happen if this project fails.

Describe these nightmares in great detail. What are your worst doubts and fears about this project?

Then give each of these possible outcomes a score from 1 to 10, based on whether that negative outcome would have permanent impact, where a score of 1 means no permanent impact, and a score of 10 being permanently life changing.

For example, leaving your well paid job to write full time when you have not written anything yet, and you have a mortgage to pay every month, might score a 10, while submitting a short story to a magazine could score a 2.

2. In the second column, write down the very best outcomes if this project is a success.

What are the positive outcomes and benefits of this project? These could be internal (such as increased self-confidence and knowledge) or external, such as increased income and better lifestyle.

3. In the third column, write down how you would recover from each of these negative scenarios that you wrote in the first column if they were to occur.

How could you repair the damage and get things back under control?

What steps would be needed to limit and mitigate the impact of each of those worst case outcomes, and prevent them from happening?

Don't forget to consider what it would cost you to postpone this action.

If you don't work on this project, make the phone call or keep the manuscript in the drawer, what will the impact on your life six months, a year or five years from now? There is an opportunity cost associated with inaction and you should write that cost down as part of the risk assessment.

One of the advantages of this technique is that you have to write down all of your fears and concerns on paper.

This gets them out of your head, where they tend to circulate on continuous replay and onto the page where you take a long hard look at them in black and white. In many cases you will see immediately that the fear is not actually valid, or the risk is small compared with the potential benefits that this action could bring to your life.

"Typically, people don't overcome their fears because the fears are nebulous and undefined", Ferriss tells Business Insider. "To get over them, then, you need to drag your fears out into the open and confront them."

The fear of an unknown outcome can be very insidious.

By defining the worst case and analysing the possible impact, you can accept that this is a possibility and then identify ways to manage that outcome if it happens.

I have found this is one of the quickest and easiest ways to break through limiting beliefs and mental blocks about a decision or project.

The power of mitigating risk analysis lies in the fact that for most of us, the fear of the unknown is the main reason we are putting things off.

By writing down all of these fears and getting them out of our heads and onto paper, we are taking the emotion out of the imaginary worst case outcome and turning it into a challenge which needs to be addressed and evaluated. In the process we are taking the power away from the lizard brain!

"You come away from that exercise realizing, 'Wow, I was getting extremely anxious and all worked up over something that is completely preventable, reversible, or just not a very big deal,'" Tim Ferriss.

Stage #3

Break down each of the activities that you are struggling with into small steps

Here is a psychological trick which releases the stress from the situation and turns it into a learning experience.

Imagine you were telling a friend how to carry out the task you are struggling with, and showing them what to do as a demonstration.

Ask yourself a series of questions – then answer them. You can answer out loud, or simply write a list of micro-steps down on paper.

Worked Example – how to submit a manuscript to a literary agent

Question #1. If I was going to write a submission letter to an agent, where would I start? What would be the first thing I would do?

Answer #1. Oh, I would check the submission guidelines on their website and make sure that I understand what I have to do to submit the proposal for my book. It only takes a few minutes and we could do it now.

Question#2. Just as an experiment, what is the next thing I would have to do?

Answer#2. I would definitely check I have the correct name and address of the agent that I have been researching for my book. She is a perfect fit and I would love to have her represent my work. The contact details are on the website.

Question#3. Okay, now I have the submission guidelines and the details about the agent, what is the next thing I should do with my manuscript?

Answer#3. Well I would work on a great pitch letter. I even created a draft layout of everything I would write.

Question#4. How can I summarise my book in one paragraph? Have you any tips for a great first line?

Answer#4. I worked on my letter last month but I put it to one side. It's already written and I can show it to you if you like and we can edit it together.

You can see where this is going.

Breaking the traumatic big scary task down into tiny steps takes the emotional drama out of the action and you feel a sense of achievement when you complete each step.

Each tiny step acts as a fractal, a piece of the overall puzzle that will combine with the others to create a complete whole.

The amazing thing is, once you get started, your whole perception of the task and what you are capable of achieving, will be transformed.

Long term goals are like high mountains – huge intimidating structures in the distance, which you can only stare at in terrified awe. Breaking the task into mini-tasks makes that end result feel solid and achievable.

When you finish each part, the momentum builds with your confidence.

I am not suggesting we all invent imaginary friends, but writing the process down in a sequence like this tricks the brain into thinking that we are not taking a risk, it is simply a demonstration of the process.

You don't have to wait to create your success – you are making the future happen today.

SELF-AWARENESS AND INTERNAL NARRATIVES

We are all uniquely flawed and talented human beings.

This is brilliant in one way. Just think how boring it would be if we were all the same.

The flip side of that is we carry with us the psychological baggage of decades of certain patterns of thinking and belief systems.

Every one of us is a Product of the Stories that we tell Ourselves

Most of those stories are everyday tales of the exciting things we noticed in the supermarket or on the way to work or retelling the headlines in the news. They create patterns of meaning out of the chaos of the world around us and bring order and sense to events and situations.

Some other stories are more insidious.

These are the stories we make up inside our heads to cope with life, which we use as a type of window, through which we view our lives and our interactions with those around us.

Stories from the past

We all remember the wonderful summer holidays or the Christmas mornings and birthday celebrations we had as a child.

If you were going to describe a special childhood beach holiday to someone, which parts of those memories would you include in the story? They would definitely want to hear about the amazing sandcastles you built, swimming in the warm sea with your family and camping outside under the stars.

What about the car sickness, sunburn, family arguments and mosquito bites?

You might want to leave those bits out of the story.

In the same way, if someone asked you to write a biography and describe how you became a writer, there is strong chance that you would pick and choose events from your past and put them together to create a story about how you developed your passion and drive in your topic.

This story would conveniently miss out the negative aspects such as your academic failure, or your total lack of interest in anything to do with work until dire necessity, poverty or threats about deadlines drove you to it.

If you look at press releases from celebrities or business leaders, they often include *one challenge* they had to overcome on the way to their success.

They select *one negative aspect* from their past and then use that event or struggle to contrast where they are now and how far they have come.

It could be anything from poverty, injury, illness, dyslexia, self-abuse, addiction and homelessness to bullying and physical abuse.

We all love to hear an heroic tale about someone who has achieved success despite the odds stacked against them.

These **Zero to Hero** stories are carefully constructed fables and if they tell them over and over again, that person is not only associated with that history but they come to believe it is the only true version of their past.

They craft and manipulate this story about their past in order to present a very specific picture to the world about how they overcame struggles to achieve their current success.

Is it true? Yes, it is probably a one-time event from the past, which, when taken alone would appear to have been a colossal challenge, but is this a selective media or marketing message used to create a “hook”?

For example:

- The former sportsman Lewis Howes. “From his Sister’s Couch to 2.5 Million in Revenue Last Year.”
- Oprah Winfrey was raised by a single teenage mother and is now an Oscar-nominated actress, a billionaire, and philanthropist.
- J.K. Rowling submitted the manuscript for the Harry Potter to 12 publishers before it was accepted and had very little money to support herself and her daughter at the time. Thanks to the huge worldwide success of the franchise, Rowling is now one of the richest people in Britain.

Are these events the only reason they are successful?

Of course not. But good luck, relentless hard work, a punishing drive to succeed and meeting the right people at the right time in the right place don’t make good sound bites for TV interviews or press releases.

It makes sense for someone building a brand to focus on one simple backstory that they want people to believe and keep on telling the same story to everyone they meet. It is their public identity.

Well guess what? *We are all doing precisely the same thing every single day.*

We are telling ourselves stories about our past and our future potential which are repeated so many times that they become part of who we and who we will become.

If you grew up in a family where your parents kept telling you that you are too stupid to learn any kind of musical instrument or sports, or that you came from a family of losers and you had better get used to it; that low self-worth, lack of confidence and mistrust will be ingrained into our belief system and can define who we are and what we do today.

Have you ever told a story about an event in your past, and then stopped and thought for a second about whether you can trust your memory about that event?

Did you win the school trophy for tennis or was that your brother?

Did your mother ever tell you out loud that you had to earn her love with good exam grades and doing what you were told, or was that something you believe is true?

How to Re-Write the Stories We Tell Ourselves

If we accept that the most of our fears are based on the unknown future reaction to our work, whether that be fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of loss or even fear of success, then we can deal with the root cause of the problem.

We can take control of what the future will be like.

We can replace uncertainty with certainty, and substitute worst case predictions of the future with best case predictions.

Start by stepping back from the problems at hand and start working today to shape the future you want for yourself.

#1. What will your future self look like?

Take pen and paper and describe in great detail what your future self will look like when you achieve the final destination for your projects, where and how you shall live and how you will spend each day.

Collect images from magazines or create online photo collages on Pinterest if this helps. By the end of this exercise you will have created a pseudo-memory which is not only motivating but inspiring.

Give yourself permission to believe in this future.

#2. Sell yourself on your new identity.

Believe this is not only possible but it is going to happen, and it is completely within your personal power to make it happen.

Tell yourself a mini-story about how you came to create this success in your life. Be creative. Create your zero to hero story as though you were chatting to a journalist about your success.

Make up a backstory. Believe in it. Create a memory to replace the old narrative.

Give yourself permission to believe in this new identity.

#3. Create certainty by using hard facts and numbers.

Decide on how you are going to measure progress towards your end results.

Many authors track the wordcount or the number of pages in the current work in progress every day and every week, but the metrics you select are entirely up to you.

Don't waste time with fancy apps and software. A simple chart on a sheet of paper, whiteboard or spreadsheet will work just the same.

Break the project down into bite size chunks and work steadily through them step by step. If life interferes, simply move onto the next section when you are able. Keep moving forward every day towards the end result.

Create a small win every day so that you can tell yourself:

Here is the proof that I can do this.

No more self-doubt. I've got this!

I have all of the tools and skills I need and I will make this project happen.

Give yourself permission to have small wins every day which you can measure and track.

#4. Accept you cannot control the opinion of other people.

You cannot control how other people will react to your work – but you can control how you respond to their feedback.

There are going to be situations where you are working with other people and asking them for their comments on your work. This could be a book proposal to a literary agent, or a draft manuscript to an editor or beta-reader, or a published book released into the wild, fully exposed to anyone who wants to leave an online review.

As a published author, I know what it feels like to have a revision letter from an editor which challenges my story.

The only way to deal with it is by giving the comment or criticism distance. Put any feedback aside for at least 24hrs and then come back, break the comments into chunks and try to be as objective as you can be with your own work. Put yourself into their shoes. You may not agree on every point but you will probably find merit in some, if not all, of their suggestions.

Ask yourself this question: ***Is there anything I can say to this person which would make them change their mind?***

If the answer is no, then you would be wasting your precious time coming up with a suitable response.

If you have to reply to the feedback, make it as professional, polite and unemotional as possible. Yes, I know that is hard, but the last thing you want to do is to shift into self-defence or argumentative mood.

You think that you are defending your work and, in turn, yourself, but actually all you are doing is handing over all of the power to the person giving you feedback.

Take a look at some of the social media rants or book reviews on Goodreads or Amazon to see how very damaging public spats can be.

The new story says that I respect this person's opinion and I value their feedback. It is not personal. It is simply an opinion.

Give yourself permission to accept that you have no control of other people.

#5. Take complete control of the quality of your work

You may not be able to control the opinions of other people, but you can control how you work and the quality of the work you produce. Nobody will ever be able to say you did not work hard enough to take this project to completion to the best of your ability.

I've got this. Leave it to me to get the job done.

Give yourself permission to take complete ownership for your work.



I love to hear from my readers, so if you have any questions or suggestions, feel free to get in touch at: Nina@ninaharrington.com and visit my website for the latest posts and news: <http://ninaharrington.com/>