



# Doctor Debug™

Ron Sterling, M.D.

## ***The Time to Hesitate is Through***

### ***Dear Doc:***

I am 27 years old, and I am working towards a Ph.D. in economics. Sometimes, I am amazed at how I have made it this far because I am a great procrastinator. I almost always wait until the last possible minute to get things done. In my personal life, forget it. I am constantly late to appointments and I often screw-up on promises. A lot of people have given up on me. My girlfriend thinks I am angry about something and that

procrastinating is just my way of rebelling. I plan on making a New Year's resolution about being on time. Can you help me on this?  
*Signed: Resolute in Redmond*

### ***Dear Resolute:***

Thank you for writing!

I promise to answer your question... sometime. Ummm... just kidding!

I think there are no Procrastinators Anonymous groups mostly because such dillydalliers and their friends generally *don't* take the problem seriously. Many Americans have what I call a "Popeye Complex." That "I-am-what-I-am" attitude seriously disables even believing

in the concept of growth and change. By writing to me, you may be taking the first real step toward working on your stalling syndrome.

The short answer to your question is your girlfriend is probably correct about your conflict. However, there are many other possibilities. It isn't just laziness that gets in the way of us reaching our goals. As most therapists would say, "it goes much deeper than that."

### ***Debugging Procrastination***

There are two major reasons that people procrastinate: they were either overindulged or underindulged as kids. Now, not all of us were overindulged or underindulged. Sometimes, our parents actually got it close to right and didn't contribute to any major conflict over the issue of responsibilities.

The overindulged folks often have an "entitlement complex." Unless someone more powerful like a boss or a teacher comes along, these folks just don't feel that they have to do anything on anyone else's schedule. These are the "spoiled brat" procrastinators. What they do is just plain rude, but they don't care. In fact, they generally don't get that they even have a problem. Do you know any spoiled people who do?

The *underindulged* folks are those who were always being told what to do and when to do it, and never got much of a vote. Because they were so controlled or intimidated, as soon as they got the chance to do what *they* wanted to do, they went for it, big time. Even if what mom or dad told them to do is good for them now, they are *not* going to do it, no matter what. They may continue to rebel even when the rebelling process screws them up.

The most useful word for understanding procrastination is "stalling." By stalling, we can appease the demands of requirements or responsibilities while at the same time satisfying our inner reaction to rebel. By essentially saying to ourselves "in just a minute," we neither openly defy nor immediately obey. It is a classic self-defeating behavior pattern. Nothing gets accomplished quite like it could, when it could.

I don't know which pattern fits you the best, but I am sure that you will figure that out. Once you figure it out, you will know what to do. You either have to accept that you are a brat and own up to it, or notice that you are a pretty angry guy underneath it all and don't want anyone telling you what to do. To become "cooperative" could be

difficult when it rubs you so wrong. But that is what it is all about, healthy cooperation. Quite often a short series of sessions with a good therapist to kick-start our awareness and amplify our motivation can be very useful. Check PsychologyHelp.com to "Be Your Own Therapist."

### ***Debugging Broken Resolutions***

You can be as realistic as possible, plan far ahead, break down your goals into tiny steps, reward yourself, track your progress, and do all the things a coach would tell you to do to keep your resolutions, but you won't, unless you know and own up to the truth about your overindulged or underindulged self.

Because making New Year's resolutions is a well-known tradition, it carries the same

emotional tension as parental demands. So, we may try to dismiss New Year's resolutions as trite and banal. This rationalization makes for a great escape for those of us looking to view the resolution process with disdain (that would be the brat type) or to look at resolutions with a sense of "don't tell me what to do" (that would be the rebellious type).

If you find yourself *not* celebrating the concept of resolution-making, you can bet it is for an emotionally-charged reason. Your programming is getting in the way. Before you can change, you have to believe in the process of change, which starts with a resolution. Recognizing our emotional response to the concept of resolutions should allow us to get past our rationalizations for dismissing the tradition.

Maybe New Year's is not a good time to be making resolutions if you are the rebellious type. Consider giving your resolutions more meaning by making them on or around your birthday -- a more personal day of renewal.

Most of you Jim Morrison fans are going to find this severely perverted, but one of the ways I keep myself on time and making those stepwise changes I want to make is by singing to myself -- "the time to hesitate is through, no time to wallow in the mire."

I guess that proves that even the wrong song with the right lyrics can work, if you let it.

—*Doctor Debug*  
*December 26, 2002*

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**Feeling bugged?** Write to Doctor Debug, a psychiatrist with 27 years of counseling experience. Ask him about mental wellness, or send questions regarding personal, social, relationship, medication or sexual concerns.

E-mail sent to Doctor Debug is read only by Ron Sterling, M.D. No identities, whatsoever, will be revealed in any published answers.

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