



The Avoidance Cycle.

Understanding why you put things off, what keeps the loop going, and how to break the entry point.

Avoidance is not laziness. It is a protective response to something that feels threatening. This resource helps you identify what that is and work with it differently.

It is not about willpower.

Most men who struggle with procrastination have heard a version of the same story about themselves – they are lazy, disorganised, or lack discipline. That story is almost always wrong. And it makes the problem worse.

The avoidance cycle is a learned loop. It usually starts with a task that carries some kind of emotional weight. It might feel overwhelming, time-consuming, or tied up in your sense of how well you are doing. Your body reads that as a threat. Avoidance is the automatic response. In the short term, it works – the discomfort eases. So the pattern repeats.

The problem is what happens next. The task is still there. Now there is also guilt about not having done it, and often a growing dread about how much harder it feels. When you eventually sit down to do it, you are not just doing the task. You are pushing through all of that resistance first. By the time you finish, you are exhausted, often angry at yourself, and the loop has tightened.

THE SHAPE OF THE LOOP

TRIGGER	A task arrives that carries emotional weight.
DREAD	The body responds as if the task is a threat.
AVOIDANCE	You find something else to do. The discomfort eases temporarily.
SHAME BUILDS	Time passes. The task feels heavier. Self-criticism starts.
RESISTANCE	Sitting down to work now means pushing through shame as well as the task.
LATE-NIGHT BURST	Deadline pressure finally overrides the resistance. You get it done.
SELF-CRITICISM	You are angry at yourself for letting it happen again. The loop resets.

The cycle is not a character flaw. It is a pattern. Patterns can be understood, interrupted, and changed.

A note on ADHD: task-initiation difficulty, sensitivity to overwhelm, and this exact loop are central to how ADHD tends to show up in adults, particularly in men who have managed well enough that it has never been picked up. If you recognise the pattern strongly, talk to your GP. A diagnosis does not define you. It gives you more to work with.

Map your cycle.

Before you can change the pattern, you need to see it clearly. This section is not about judging what you find. It is about getting an accurate picture of the loop as it actually runs for you.

01 Name the task that triggers the cycle.

Be specific. Not 'work' or 'planning' in general. Identify the particular task or moment where the avoidance typically starts.

What is the specific task, moment, or point in the week when it begins?

Write here...

What does the dread feel like, physically? Where do you notice it in your body?

Write here...

Map your cycle.

02 Describe what avoidance looks like for you.

Avoidance rarely looks like sitting still doing nothing. It usually looks like productive activity that is not the task.

What do you do instead? List the specific distractions or substitute activities.

Write here...

How long does the avoidance phase typically last before you force yourself to start?

Write here...

03 Describe what finally breaks the avoidance.

Something eventually forces the start. Understanding what that trigger is tells you something important.

What is it that finally makes you sit down and do it?

Write here...

How do you feel when you start? How do you feel when you finish?

Write here...

What the avoidance is protecting.

Avoidance is not random. It is protecting you from something that feels threatening. That something is usually a belief or a fear – about performance, identity, time, or other people's expectations. Understanding it does not make it disappear, but it gives you something concrete to work with.

04 What does the task represent?

Think about what would happen if you did it badly, or not at all. What does that say about you, in your own mind?

If you do this task poorly, what does that mean about you?

It means I am...

Where did that belief come from? Is there an earlier version of this in your life?

Write here...

What the avoidance is protecting.

05 Is there a perfectionism thread?

High standards and perfectionism are not the same thing. Perfectionism is when the fear of doing something imperfectly becomes a reason not to start. It often disguises itself as thoroughness.

Do you set a higher standard for this task than it actually requires? If so, why?

Write here...

What would a "good enough" version of this task look like, honestly?

Write here...

06 What does the avoidance cost you?

Avoidance works in the short term. But there is a longer-term account. Write it honestly.

What does the avoidance cost you in time, energy, sleep, or how you feel about yourself?

Write here...

Is there any part of you that already knows the avoidance is making things worse, not easier?

Write here...

A different entry point

You do not need to solve the whole cycle at once. The most useful place to interrupt it is right at the start - how you approach sitting down with the task. What you actually do matters more than what you plan to do.

07 **Make the starting condition smaller.**

The task itself does not need to change. The entry point does. A smaller start lowers the resistance enough to get going. Movement is what breaks the loop.

What is the smallest possible version of starting this task? Not completing it. Just starting.

e.g. Open the document and write one heading. Set a timer for 10 minutes only.

What time and place gives you the best realistic chance of starting? Be honest, not aspirational.

Write here...

A different entry point

08 Separate planning from doing.

One of the most reliable ways to increase resistance is to sit down to 'do the work' without any structure. The task feels formless and you look for an exit. Five minutes of planning before you start removes that.

What would a five-minute planning note look like for your next session with this task? Write it now.

What do I need to produce? What is the first action? What can I leave for later?

09 Interrupt the self-criticism after.

The self-criticism that follows a late finish is the part of the cycle that most tightens the loop. It is not a motivator. It increases the emotional weight of the task next time.

Write what you would say to a friend who had just described this exact cycle to you.

Write here...

Now rewrite that using I-statements, as if you are saying it to yourself.

I...

Read both versions back. What feels different when you write it as "I"? Notice the gap between what you would offer a friend and what you habitually offer yourself.

Write here...

Most men notice they would never speak to someone they respected the way they speak to themselves after a hard night. That gap is not a personal failing. It is a double standard most of us were never taught to question. Learning to be your own friend is not a one-time reframe. It is a daily practice, and some days it will not stick. That is normal. Keep noticing the gap, because the gap is where the work lives.

The loop can be broken.

Working through this resource is a start. But reading about a pattern and changing it are different things. The cycle took time to form. Breaking it takes time too.

A few things worth carrying forward:

Avoidance is a protective response, not a personality trait.

The emotional weight is almost always about something underneath the task, not the task itself.

Starting small is not laziness. It is how change actually works.

The self-criticism that follows a late finish is not helping. It is loading the next attempt.

If this has been with you for years and nothing shifts it, it is worth talking to your GP.

If any of this described something you recognise in yourself, not just as a productivity problem but as something that has been going on for a long time, that you have kept quiet about, and that has cost you more than it should, that is worth paying attention to.

If you want to talk before committing to anything, the free 15-minute call at Mettle is a straightforward conversation. No script. No assessment. Just an honest conversation about what is going on and what might actually help.

BOOK A FREE 15-MINUTE CALL

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