

ACE Fitness matters®

\$5.00

Volume 15

Issue 2

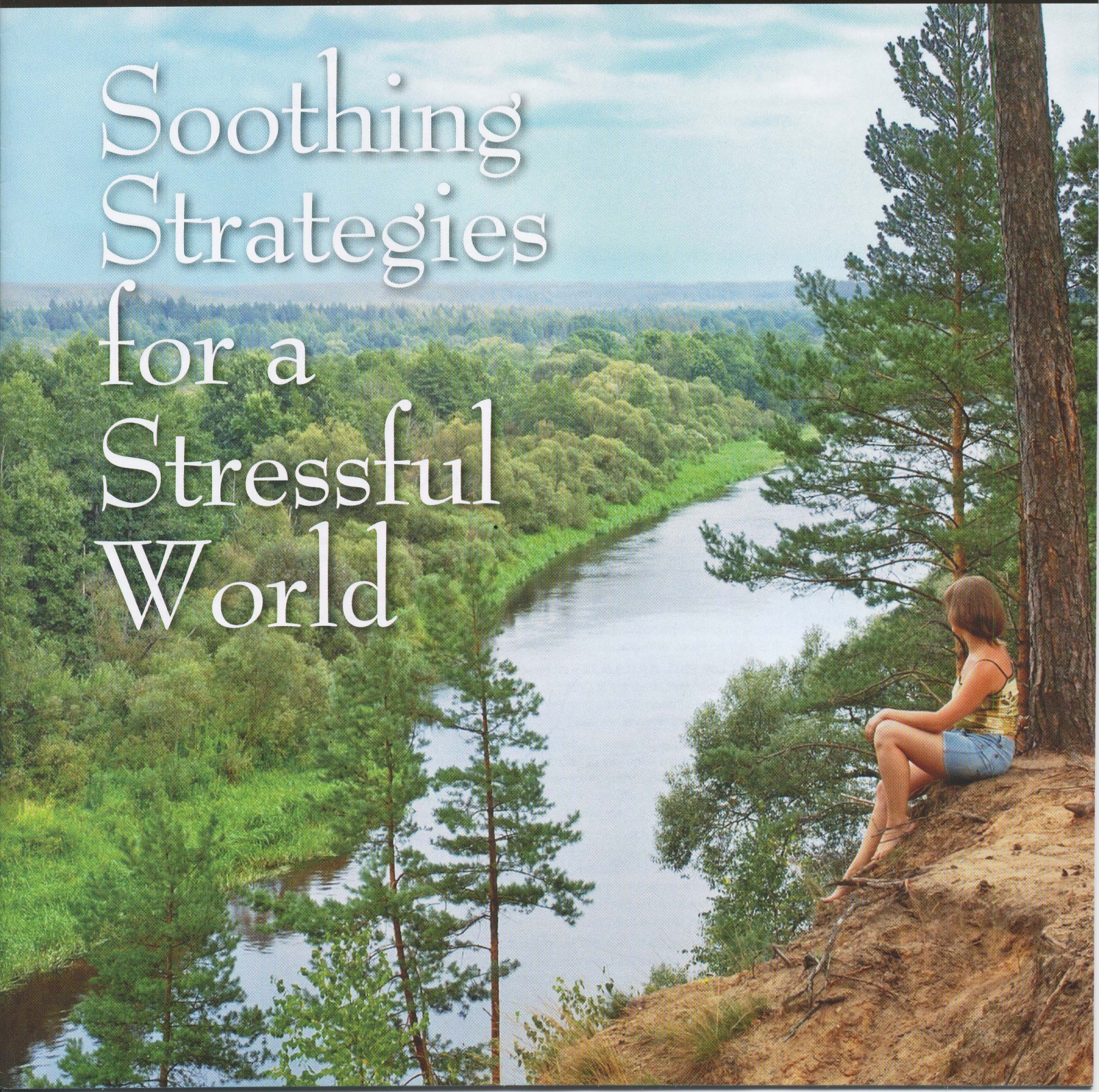
March/April

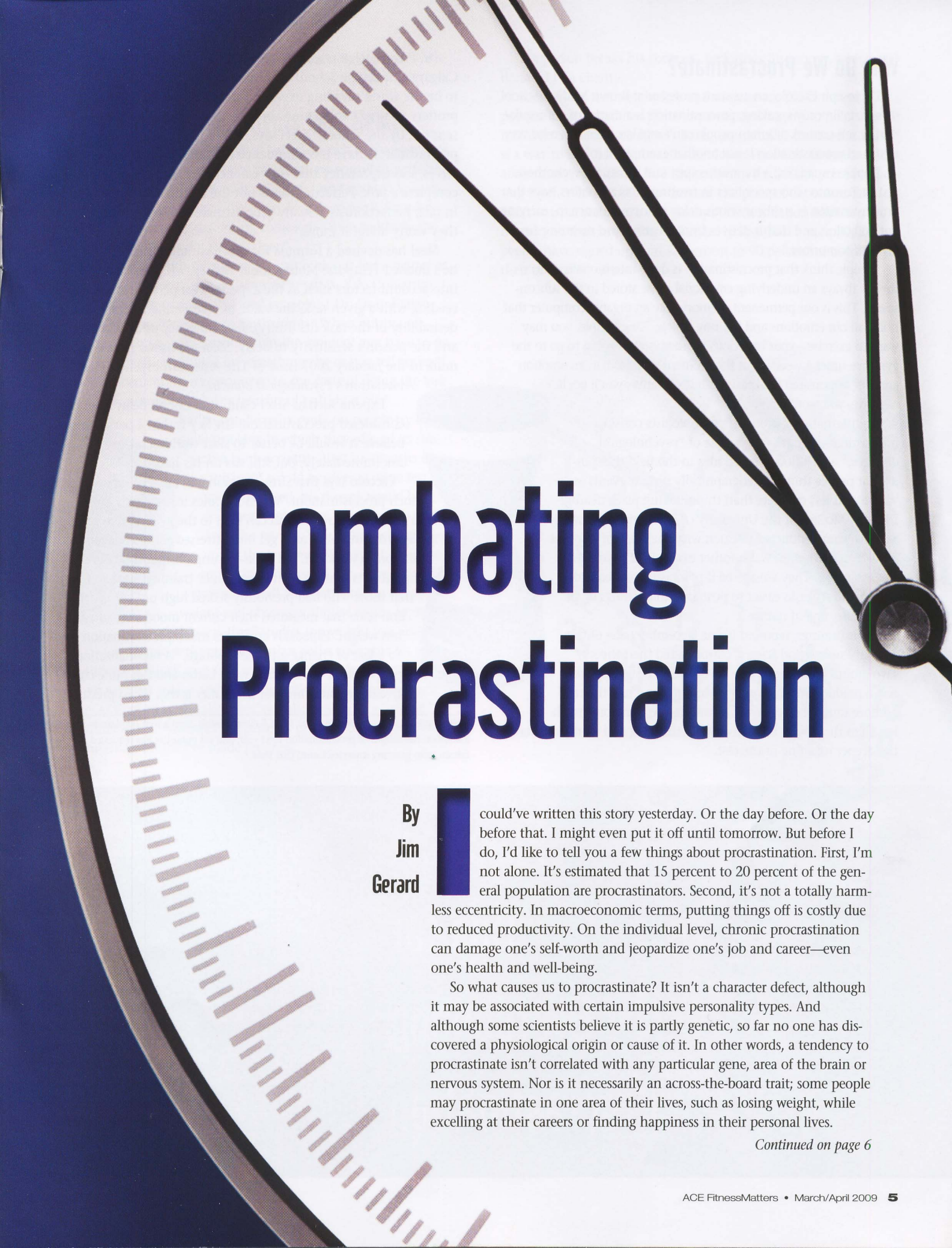
2009

AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION

Soothing Strategies for a Stressful World





Combating Procrastination

By
Jim
Gerard

I could've written this story yesterday. Or the day before. Or the day before that. I might even put it off until tomorrow. But before I do, I'd like to tell you a few things about procrastination. First, I'm not alone. It's estimated that 15 percent to 20 percent of the general population are procrastinators. Second, it's not a totally harmless eccentricity. In macroeconomic terms, putting things off is costly due to reduced productivity. On the individual level, chronic procrastination can damage one's self-worth and jeopardize one's job and career—even one's health and well-being.

So what causes us to procrastinate? It isn't a character defect, although it may be associated with certain impulsive personality types. And although some scientists believe it is partly genetic, so far no one has discovered a physiological origin or cause of it. In other words, a tendency to procrastinate isn't correlated with any particular gene, area of the brain or nervous system. Nor is it necessarily an across-the-board trait; some people may procrastinate in one area of their lives, such as losing weight, while excelling at their careers or finding happiness in their personal lives.

Continued on page 6

Why Do We Procrastinate?

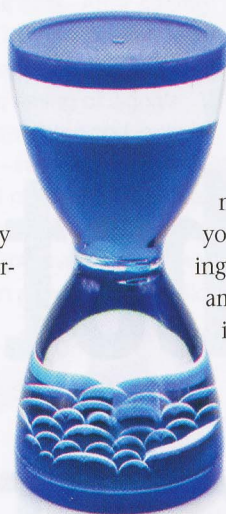
Dr. Joseph Ciccolo, an assistant professor at Brown Medical School, says that clinically speaking, procrastination is a matter of self-regulation or self-control. "Certain people can't regulate their behavior very well, and procrastination is just another example of it."

Debbie Papadakis, a hypnotherapist and spiritual psychotherapist in Toronto who specializes in treating procrastinators, says that procrastination is a subconscious delay in, or avoidance to, carrying out an action and that it derives from a Latin word meaning "in favor of tomorrow."

"People think that procrastination is done intentionally, but there's always an underlying emotional cause stored in the subconscious. This is our permanent memory, like an organic computer that holds all our emotions and limiting beliefs. For example, you may want to exercise—your conscious mind says, 'I'm going to go to the gym five times a week'—but the moment you do that, an emotion arises in response to the thought. If it's positive, you'll go, if negative, you won't."

An international group of psychologists consider procrastination to be an example of "psychological distance," a well-documented idea in the field that posits that people think of geographically distant events as vaguer and less concrete than things taking place nearby. Dr. Sean McCrea of the University of Konstanz in Germany and his team conducted research with the hope of discovering if procrastination was another example of psychological distancing. They wondered if procrastinators consider vague abstract tasks easier to postpone than things of an immediate, urgent nature.

Their findings, reported in the December issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, corroborated their theory. Two groups of students were given a test; the group who had a predilection for concrete thinking and saw the test as more immediate delayed answering the questions much less than those who favored abstract thinking and wondered about the deeper meaning of the test.



Dr. Piers Steel, a researcher at the University of Calgary's Haskayne School of Business who claims to be the world's leading expert on procrastination, proffers another explanation. In a press release sent out by the school,* Steel says, "Essentially, procrastinators have less confidence in themselves, less expectancy that they can actually complete a task. Perfectionism is not the culprit. In fact, perfectionists actually procrastinate less, but they worry about it more."

Steel has devised a formula for procrastination that he's dubbed Temporal Motivational Theory, which takes into account factors such as the expectancy a person has of succeeding with a given task, the value of completing the task, the desirability of the task (its utility), its immediacy or availability and the person's sensitivity to delay. Steel published his formula in the January 2007 issue of *The American Psychological Association's Psychological Bulletin*.

Experts such as Steel claim that not all delays can be considered procrastination; the key is that a person must believe it would be better to start working on a given task immediately, but still sits on his hands.

Ciccolo says that stress, tension and anxiety explain much procrastination: "When it comes to, say, exercise, if you're tense or stressed and can't get to the gym, you're working against yourself. You'll get more stressed and have even less ambition to work out." In an as-yet-unpublished study involving subjects doing a bout of resistance training, Ciccolo found that those who had previously scored high on a procrastination scale that measured their current mood state lifted less weight. Papadakis attributes much procrastination to a fear of change and self-sabotage. "A rationalization people often use is that 'I work better and I'm more creative under pressure,' but the reality is that when pressure

*Steel turned down a request to speak to *ACE FitnessMatters*, saying that he plans to publish a book on the subject of procrastination next year, and his publisher has requested that he refrain from granting interviews until that time.



Practical Tips for Overcoming Procrastination

Should you be less inclined to gamble on your ability to overcome procrastination, here are some other practical tips:

- ☒ Form a clear picture of what you want and focus on your goals.
- ☒ Change your limiting beliefs.
- ☒ Develop a plan.
- ☒ Break down the activity into smaller tasks. For example, start by exercising for 10 minutes a day, or working on a project for a half hour, and gradually increase the time.



increases, intelligence and creative thinking are diminished. We're more creative if ideas come to us."

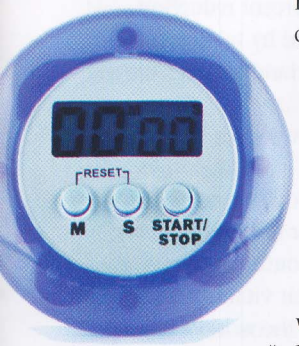
How Procrastination Affects Your Health

When it comes to health-related behavior such as trying to lose weight, a fear of failure and embarrassment are contributing factors to procrastination. And, she adds, willpower isn't enough to overcome our internal resistance. "We may be able to use it for a few weeks, until something distressing comes up—then suddenly the diet and exercise goes out the window."

Some economists believe that procrastination is less a matter of psychological forces than a cost-benefit analysis. Yale University economics professor and behavioral economist Dr. Dean Karlan describes the mechanics of procrastination: "When putting off things that you say you want to do in the moment you have to do them, you're either tempted by something else or you tell yourself it's not convenient. In economic terms, the costs of doing the task now outweigh the benefits of putting it off."

Karlan conducted a study on people trying to quit smoking in which they offered its subjects a bank account. After six months each participant would be given a urine test and if he failed, his money would be sent to a local orphanage; otherwise he could keep the money. The people who signed up for the test were 30 percent more successful in nixing smoking. After trying the system himself while attempting to lose weight and observing similar results in other "self-regulating" studies (on weight loss and academic performance), Karlan and a colleague set up a

Web site, www.StickK.com (the second "K" is for "contract"), where users set up their goal(s) and have the option of putting as much money as they want at stake. They can also designate a "referee" who either directly oversees the person's progress or receives e-mails when users report they've made progress.



If a person breaks his contract, he forfeits his money, which is donated to a charity.

Karlan says that weight loss and exercise are the two most popular targets, and has plans to partner with gyms to help their members achieve their fitness goals using similar contracts. "StickK is a way to increase the benefits but lower the costs. In essence, it's about market decisions. You say you want to diet but you keep putting it off. With StickK, you increase the price of chocolate cake to \$100 or whatever figure you put up." With inflation like that, it's no wonder that, according to Karlan, in less than a year, 30,000 people have signed up, and 85 percent to 90 percent of users fulfill their contracts. **A**



- ☒ Act as if you have overcome your procrastination, to build and form positive habits.
- ☒ Use positive suggestions (affirmations) to reinforce your determination.
- ☒ Avoid environments that encourage the bad habit you're trying to break.
- ☒ Keep a written record of your progress.
- ☒ Create new habits to support your new behavior. For example, exercise first thing in the morning if you tend to skip it if you schedule it later in the day.
- ☒ Use self-hypnosis and self-talk. For example, what is your language when thinking about exercise? Is it defeatist and full of fear? If so, substitute positive language, such as, "I'm going to feel and look so much better by working out."
- ☒ Reward yourself for each small step accomplished.
- ☒ Find a helpmate or partner.
- ☒ Have friends and family support and reinforce your success.
- ☒ Avoid people who express doubt or other negative attitudes toward your goal.
- ☒ Visualize yourself accomplishing your goal.