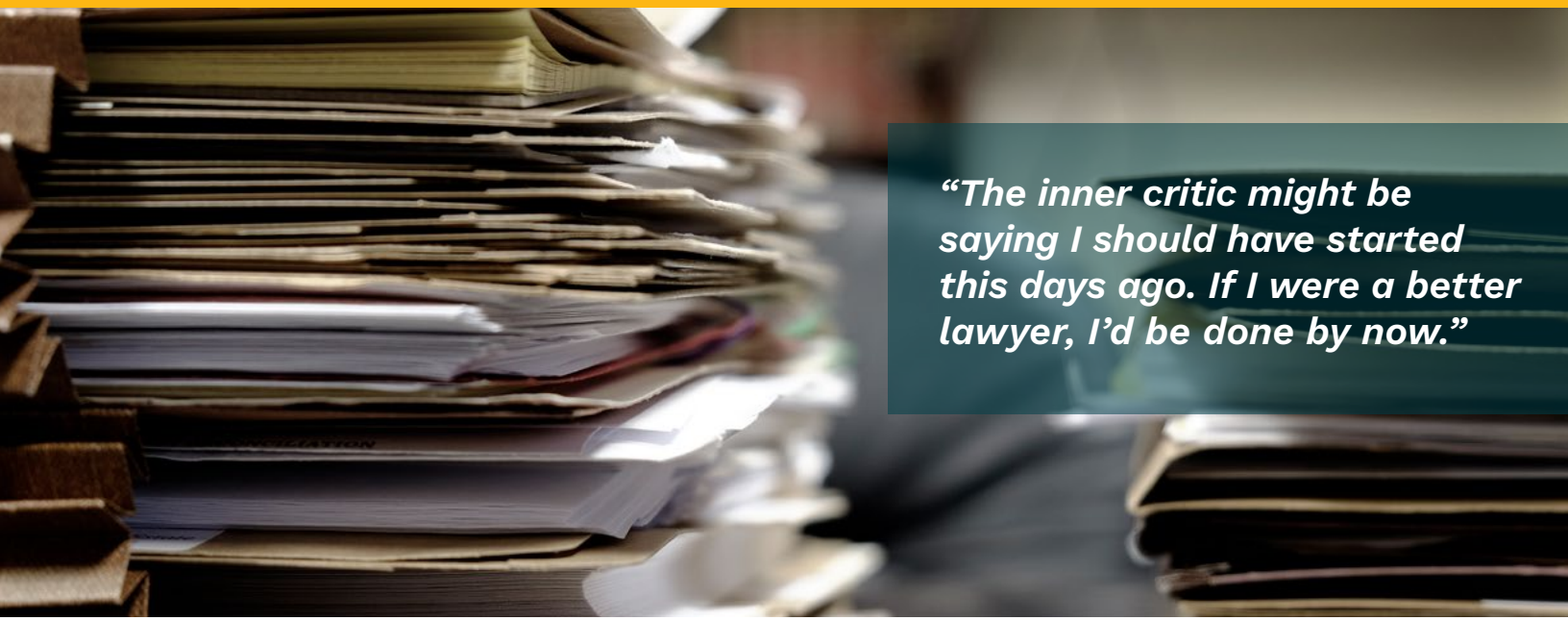
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Why Being Kinder to Yourself Can Help You Stop Procrastinating

by Bryan Welch

Most lawyers know the feeling. You can’t bring yourself to open the file that sits untouched on the corner of your desk. Or answer that phone call from a difficult client from last week. Or maybe get your billing done. When these things happen we often assume that this procrastination reflects a lack of discipline or motivation.

In reality, lawyers frequently delay work not because they are lazy or undisciplined, but because the task feels emotionally risky. The stakes seem high. We worry about making a mistake or producing something less than perfect. Or perhaps we want to avoid conflict or feeling “not good enough.”

Procrastination offers temporary relief from those uncomfortable feelings, but it also increases stress as deadlines approach. So we respond the way many lawyers have been trained to respond: with harsh self-criticism and by becoming even more demanding of ourselves. That in turn increases stress and anxiety, which makes it harder to start, and the delay continues.

There is a better approach. Research has consistently found that people who practice greater self-compassion are less likely to procrastinate.[1] Self-compassion reduces the shame, fear, and anxiety that often fuel avoidance and delay, making it easier to focus on the solution and take the next small step.

Psychologist Dr. Kristin Neff, defines self-compassion as treating ourselves with the same kindness, encouragement, and understanding we would offer a trusted colleague or friend. Self-compassion is not lowering standards or making excuses. It means acknowledging that mistakes, setbacks, and moments of self-doubt are part of being human rather than evidence that we are failing.[2]

Imagine you've been avoiding a complicated writing project. You know the deadline is approaching, and you know the work needs your attention, but every time you open the file, you find yourself looking for something else to do. You answer an email, check your calendar, get another cup of coffee—anything that allows you to postpone sitting down with the difficult part. Meanwhile, the deadline gets closer and your anxiety grows. Dr. Kristin Neff's three components of self-compassion can offer a better way to respond when you find yourself stuck.

Mindfulness instead of over-identification. First, pause and notice what's happening. I'm feeling anxious because this motion is really important. I'm worried my boss won't like it. Rather than becoming absorbed in thoughts like *I'm a failure* or *I'm no good at this*, acknowledge those feelings without judgment. Mindfulness allows you to experience anxiety and self-doubt without turning them into conclusions about yourself. *I'm feeling anxious* is different from I'm an *anxious person*, and *I'm worried about my work* is different from *I'm a bad lawyer*. That small shift helps you see the emotion as something you're experiencing, rather than as a verdict about who you are.

Common humanity instead of isolation. Remember that you are not alone in this feeling. Experienced attorneys everywhere occasionally avoid difficult writing projects and feel anxious or fearful. Feeling overwhelmed does not mean they are incompetent, it simply means they are human, and so are you. Recognizing that this struggle is shared adds perspective and can reduce feelings of shame.

Kindness instead of self-judgment. Having recognized the emotion and put it into perspective, respond with kindness rather than self-criticism. The inner critic might be saying *I should have started this days ago. If I were a better lawyer, I'd be done by now. It doesn't even matter because I'll do a terrible job anyway.* Challenge that voice and instead respond to it with the same kindness you might offer a friend: *This is a difficult motion. Anyone would find it challenging. I've handled difficult cases before, and I don't have to write the entire motion today. I'm good enough. I only have to get started.* Encouragement, rather than criticism, lowers the emotional barrier to beginning.

At this point, nothing about the task itself has changed. The motion is still difficult, and the deadline is still there. What has changed is your response to the discomfort. Instead of spending more energy beating yourself up and trying to make the anxiety go away, you acknowledge it, recognize that you are not alone, and offer yourself the same encouragement you might offer a colleague or a friend. Maybe that makes it possible to ask someone for help. Maybe you finally sketch an outline or write the first paragraph. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety before you act. It's to make room for the anxiety and take the next small step anyway.

The next time you catch yourself procrastinating, pause for a moment. Notice what you're saying to yourself. If your inner dialogue sounds harsher than anything you would ever say to a friend or colleague, try replacing criticism with compassion—and then get started.



"The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety before you act. It's to make room for the anxiety and take the next small step anyway."

Try This

The next time you find yourself avoiding a difficult task, pause and ask yourself three questions:

1. **Mindfulness:** What emotion am I trying to avoid right now?
2. **Common Humanity:** How many other competent lawyers have probably struggled with this exact thing?
3. **Kindness**: What would I say to a good friend or respected colleague in this situation?

Then ask one final question: What's the smallest next step I can take in the next five minutes?

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- Recognizing Signs of Traumatic Stress in Clients (Summer 2025)
- The Case for (and Against) "Mocktails" (Fall/Winter 2024)

ENDNOTES

1. Neff, Kristin D. 2023. "Self-Compassion: Theory, Method, Research, and Intervention." Annual Review of Psychology 74 (1): 193–218. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031047.
2. Sirois, Fuschia M. 2014. "Procrastination and Stress: Exploring the Role of Self-Compassion." Self and Identity 13 (2): 128–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2013.763404.