

For some Atlantic Canadians, putting Christmas shopping on the backburner until the last minute is a way of life

Dalhousie psychologist and professor says perfectionists are more prone to procrastinate because the self-imposed pressure makes them freeze and disengage from the task at hand

Colin Hodd · Freelance Writer | Posted: Dec. 19, 2022, 12:35 p.m. | Updated: Dec. 20, 2022, 7:23 a.m. | 9 Min Read



Christmas is no surprise and it's a set date on the calendar, but that doesn't keep some people from panicking over not being prepared for it in time. - krakenimages photo/Unsplash

The holiday season doesn't sneak up on us. It's a date on the calendar, not an ambush predator.

And yet, here I find myself on Dec. 18 writing a story about last-minute shopping at the last minute while I myself still have last-minute shopping to do.

I routinely finish my shopping after Dec. 23.

Wrapping? Forget it. I have rationalized my procrastination on that front into a tradition, which is that, on Christmas Eve, my Dad and I watch It's a Wonderful Life and the Alastair Sim version of A Christmas Carol (black and white of course). Then, after he goes to bed, I wrap gifts until three in the morning on Dec. 25.

I once, to my shame, finished my shopping on Dec. 29.

Reflecting on this, my first question was: Why am I like this? Why are we, the great union of last-minute shoppers, like this? So, I asked Dalhousie University psychologist and professor Simon Sherry.

He started by defining the thing that last-minute shopping really is, which is my old frenemy, procrastination.

“I guess I should put this in context,” he said. “What is procrastination, at least as a psychologist might look on it? it's delaying or postponing something that should get done and I think that maps reasonably well into the lay definition.”



Dr. Simon Sherry, a psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University, says perfectionists are more prone to procrastinate because the self-imposed pressure makes them freeze and disengage from the task at hand. - Contributed

And while us procrastinators might feel guilty, we can take solace in the fact that we're not alone. Among the undergrads that psych studies typically focus on, Sherry says some 90 per cent engage in some sort of procrastination with 50 per cent doing so habitually.

"We've got about 20 per cent of adults in the so-called general population who will identify themselves as chronic procrastinators," said Sherry. "So, given that, we can't be surprised to find last-minute shoppers out there."

Perfectionism and procrastination often go hand-in-hand. Sherry was quick to point out that perfectionism isn't the only personality trait associated with procrastination. But, even for people who are not fundamentally perfectionists, isn't the act of gift buying perfectly tuned to bring out the perfectionist in all of us?

"Perfectionists are more prone to procrastinate," said Sherry. "They put enormous pressure upon themselves to be perfect and execute a perfect plan and, sometimes, that pressure results in them freezing and disengaging from the task altogether."



Indulging in sobriety: Don't sweat it if choosing not to drink is frowned upon, say P.E.I. residents abstaining from booze



50-50 Shopping

I know I said the holidays aren't an ambush predator, but the process of gift-giving sure feels like a perfect trap for a kind of perfectionism. After all, we're buying gifts as an expression of love and care for the people in our lives. We naturally want those gifts to be meaningful.

Aaron Nunn of French River, P.E.I. describes himself as a "50-50 Shopper" — someone who gets half his shopping done early but whose last half can drag dangerously close to deadline.

"I usually try to gather a lot of good ideas at the start and then I pull the trigger on the good ideas," he explained. "But then I struggle ... I hate getting a gift just for the sake of a gift. I don't want to get a toy or give something that nobody's ever going to use."

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When I told Nunn about the idea of last-minute shopping as an expression of perfectionism, he agreed.

"I think the best part is seeing somebody open it up, right? That's probably one of the best feelings around Christmas is seeing somebody excited," he said. "Whether it be your mom or your dad or your three-year-old niece. Seeing that smile is the best part, so I think that's where the motivation for perfection (comes from)."



Some people don't sweat Christmas by getting things done well in advance, while some don't sweat until the last minute. - Unsplash+ photo

Business Eve

Roz Wilson-Oliver, one of the proprietors of Souper Duper Soup in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, spoke to me on Dec. 13, which is her record for having holiday shopping done, but an exception for her by all means.

“I was looking at memories and today last year I posted that it was done — I was wrapped, I was ready to roll,” she said. “I have been wrapping on Christmas Eve at three in the morning. We have our Christmas party every year on Christmas Eve and then, when everybody leaves, Jeremy and I wrap gifts.”

Wilson-Oliver has made peace with her style of gift buying.

“It would be nice to be already done, but it never seems to work out that way and I don't stress about it anymore,” she said. “If the kids really want something specific, then I try to get that taken care of ahead of time.

“I used to panic about it, but I don't panic about it anymore. It all gets done. I'm pretty all business when it comes to Christmas shopping on Christmas Eve. I'm going in, I'm doing what I need to do I'm getting out.”

“I used to panic about it, but I don't panic about it anymore. It all gets done.”
— *Roz Wilson-Oliver*

Temporal Motivation

Of course, even I eventually get myself together in time to sneak some presents under the tree before the rest of the family wakes up.

That's called temporal motivation, according to Sherry.

“That's just a fancy way of saying motivation to act increases as deadlines approach,” he explained. “And that would seem to be true for so many of us. Nothing quite brings us into focus like a deadline and I guess the deadline is the morning of the 25th for a lot of us shoppers.”



- REUTERS

While procrastination can come with a lot of self-recrimination, Sherry noted that it isn't always the bogeyman it's made out to be, either. Like many things, it's mostly a problem if it's interfering with your life and, crucially, if you feel it's a problem.

“Procrastination is enormously common, so clearly not everyone needs to seek help for that,” he said. “Obviously, the commonness of this behavior suggests that it's not entirely maladaptive.

“I do think that there's a cultural bias here whereby we're privileging a certain way of life that's time-pressured and hyper-organized and deadline-driven and, obviously, there's a cost to living that grind and hustle lifestyle out. It's often a cost of poor mental health and poor physical health, so I think there's something to be said in praise of those who have the ability to back off and chill out.”

Christmas Future

While both Nunn and Wilson-Oliver have reached a place of relative equilibrium with their shopping strategies, I have not. As Scrooge once implored the Ghost of Christmas Future, “Are these the shadows of the things that will be or are they shadows of the things that may be only?”

Unlike that silent specter, Sherry offered me some direct hope

“Broadly, can a procrastinator change? There is evidence that procrastination can change — people can improve,” he said. “Oftentimes we're going to lean on something called cognitive behavioral therapy to achieve such changes and, so, that's going to help people challenge patterns of thinking. There's a lot that a psychologist can do to help people overcome unhelpful patterns of procrastination.”