

Research Articles & Essays

When You Knead Structure: Can Hobbies Alleviate Pandemic-Related Anxiety?

Karly Ball
University of Virginia
Virginia, United States

Abstract

This personal reflection considers how my hobbies have helped me restore order to my routine during COVID-19. I consider pressures that my chronic health conditions have placed on working from home during a pandemic, and I attempt to consider why other people might utilize similar coping strategies to my bread baking.

Keywords: anxiety, hobbies, COVID-19

I worked at the campus coffee shop in college. My anxiety did not like the silence or intensity of the library, so I found a routine that better fit my learning style. Fast forward and the 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. office workday gave me dedicated time and space to concentrate. As is true for so many, COVID-19 meant that I needed to shift to a work-from-home schedule. No problem. But wait, I could no longer use the coffee shop as an alternate space. I actually had to work from home this time. I made a detailed schedule, but that flopped fast. Between Netflix, chores, and constantly checking my continuous glucose monitor, distractions and worry abounded from every angle. Even though my work mattered to me, I couldn't stay focused. Spending time in my kitchen (and the baking possibilities it represented) was among my favored procrastination techniques.

I had already baked cupcakes as a hobby and wanted to expand into bread, but so did everyone else. A [national yeast shortage](#) made sourdough my sole option. I read articles about baking to fill time, but I didn't think about why so many people were suddenly making bread (Guynn and Tyko, 2020). As I made more bread and pastries, I realized that I was also getting more work done. While I waited for the bread to rise, I could sit down and concentrate. I had

a deadline to finish work so that I could return to kneading when the alarm buzzed, and that meant that I didn't have time to worry about what my blood sugar might be doing or how every twitch might be a new multiple sclerosis (MS) relapse. Strange as it sounds, baking bread and pastries helped me regain some structure outside of chronic health conditions during COVID-19.

I read that some psychologists consider baking as a form of [mindfulness, altruism, or self-expression](#) (Thomson, 2017). These characteristics seem important for all people but especially for those of us who struggle with mental health. All of these ideas made sense, but they didn't explain my biggest question, "why bread, specifically?" Why did I notice a shift in work productivity when I switched from making cupcakes to bread? Why did yeast become scarce when COVID-19 hit? Perhaps other people also found comfort in baking's structure during such an uncertain time.


Psychologist [Pierce Steel](#) argues that, "to procrastinate is to voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay" (Steel, 2007). This described my problem to a tee. Several theories seek to explain [why we procrastinate](#), but I just wanted to stop doing it (Zhang, 2016). The solution? Some researchers argue that deadlines are an antidote to procrastination. Indeed, [one study](#) notes how short deadlines seem to encourage socially desirable and self-benefiting behaviors (Zamir et al., 2016). In thinking about where behavioral nudges can be used most effectively, Dr. Cass Sunstein similarly noted the importance of deadlines as self-regulatory tools that we might encourage through [text reminders](#) (Sunstein, 2019). If short deadlines can help promote productivity and nudges can remind us about those deadlines, maybe there's something to the idea that hobbies like baking bread can restore some order amidst COVID-19 for people who struggle with anxiety and concentration.

When bread proofs for 2 to 4 hours, you have a clear, short-term deadline to finish your work. There's no time to enter a rabbit hole of anxiety and unfounded concerns related to chronic illness. Timers serve as automated reminders of those work deadlines. If this is true, maybe the bread baking trend is more than a new hobby for quarantine. Maybe, in addition to therapeutic benefits, baking can help people grapple with this new work-from-home reality. And if it can, behavioral science should consider how other hobbies might be used for similar gains.

Karly Ball is a Master of Public Policy Student at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia.

References

- Guynn, J., & Tyko, K. (2020, April 23). Yeast shortage 2020: Baker's yeast is hard to find due to COVID-19. *USA TODAY*.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/food/2020/04/23/coronavirus-pantry-baking-yeast-shortage/3004274001/>
- Steel, P. (2007). The nature of procrastination: A meta-analytic and theoretical review of quintessential self-regulatory failure. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(1), 65–94.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.1.65>
- Sunstein, C. R. (2019). *How Change Happens*. The MIT Press.
- Thomson, J. (2017, March 31). Psychologists Explain the Benefits of Baking for Other People. *The Huffington Post*. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/baking-for-others-psychology_n_58dd0b85e4b0e6ac7092aaf8
- Zamir, E., Lewinsohn-Zamir, D., & Ritov, I. (2016). It's Now Or Never! Using Deadlines as Nudges. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 42(3), 769–803. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsi.12199>
- Zhang, J. (2016). Deadlines in Product Development. *Management Science*, 62(11), 3310–3326. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2015.2300>

 When You Knead Structure: Can Hobbies Alleviate Pandemic-Related Anxiety? by [Karly Ball](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#). Based on a work at <https://rdsjournal.org>.