

PRODUCTIVITY

# How to Keep Working When You're Just Not Feeling It

by [Ayelet Fishbach](#)

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**M**otivating yourself is hard. In fact, I often compare it to one of the exploits of the fictional German hero Baron Munchausen: Trying to sustain your drive through a task, a project, or even a career can sometimes feel like pulling yourself out of a swamp by your own hair. We seem to have a natural aversion to persistent effort that no amount of caffeine or inspirational posters can fix.

But effective self-motivation is one of the main things that distinguishes high-achieving professionals from everyone else. So how can you keep pushing onward, even when you don't feel like it?

To a certain extent, motivation is personal. What gets you going might not do anything for me. And some individuals do seem to have more stick-to-itiveness than others. However, after 20 years of research into human motivation, my team and I have identified several strategies that seem to work for most people—whether they're trying to lose weight, save for retirement, or implement a long, difficult initiative at work. If you've ever failed to reach an attainable goal because of procrastination or lack of commitment—and who of us hasn't?—I encourage you to read on. These four sets of tactics can help propel you forward.

## **Design Goals, Not Chores**

Ample research has documented the importance of goal setting. Studies have shown, for example, that when salespeople have targets, they close more deals, and that when individuals make daily exercise commitments, they're more likely to increase their fitness levels. Abstract ambitions—such as “doing your best”—are usually much less effective than something concrete, such as bringing in 10 new customers a month or walking 10,000 steps a day. As a first general rule, then, any objectives you set for yourself or agree to should be specific.

Goals should also, whenever possible, trigger intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation. An activity is intrinsically motivated when it's seen as its own end; it's extrinsically motivated when it's seen as serving a separate, ulterior purpose—earning you a reward or allowing you to avoid punishment. My research shows that intrinsic motives predict achievement and success better than extrinsic ones do.

The trick is to focus on the *elements* of the work that you do find enjoyable.

Take New Year's resolutions. We found that people who made resolutions at the start of January that were more pleasant to pursue—say, taking on a yoga class or phone-free Saturdays—were more likely to still be following through on them in March than people who chose more-important but less enjoyable goals. This is despite the obvious fact that aspirations for the New Year are usually tough to achieve; if they weren't, they wouldn't require a resolution!

Of course, if the external reward is great enough, we'll keep at even the most unpleasant tasks. Undergoing chemotherapy is an extreme example. In a work context, many people stay in their jobs for the money, feeling like “wage slaves.” But in such situations they usually do the minimum required to meet the goal. Extrinsic motivation alone is unlikely to help us truly excel.

In an ideal world we would all seek out work roles and environments that we enjoy and thus keep our engagement high. Unfortunately, people often fail to do this. For example, my research shows that when asked whether positive relationships with colleagues and managers are critical in their current position, most people say yes. But they don't remember that office morale was key to success in past jobs, nor do they predict it will be important for them in the future. So simply remembering to consider intrinsic motivation when choosing jobs and taking on projects can go a long way toward helping sustain success.

In cases where that's impractical—we don't all find jobs and get assignments we love—the trick is to focus on the *elements* of the work that you do find enjoyable. Think expansively about how accomplishing the task might be satisfying—by, for example, giving you a chance to showcase your skills in front of your company's leaders, build important internal relationships, or create value for customers. Finally, try to offset drudgery with activities that you find rewarding—for instance, listen to music while tackling that big backlog of e-mail in your in-box, or do boring chores with friends, family, or your favorite colleagues.

## **Find Effective Rewards**

Some tasks or even stretches of a career are entirely onerous—in which case it can be helpful to create external motivators for yourself over the short- to-medium term, especially if they complement incentives offered by your organization. You might promise yourself a vacation for finishing a project or buy yourself a gift for losing weight. But be careful to avoid perverse incentives. One mistake is to reward yourself for the quantity of completed tasks or for speed when you actually care about the quality of performance. An accountant who treats herself for finishing her auditing projects quickly might leave herself open to mistakes, while a salesperson focused on maximizing sales rather than repeat business should probably expect some unhappy customers.

Another common trap is to choose incentives that undermine the goal you've reached. If a dieter's prize for losing weight is to eat pizza and cake, he's likely to undo some of his hard work and reestablish bad habits. If the reward for excelling at work one week is to allow yourself to slack off the next, you could diminish the positive impression you've made. Research on what psychologists call balancing shows that goal achievement sometimes licenses people to give in to temptation—which sets them back.

In addition, some external incentives are more effective than others. For instance, in experiments researchers have discovered that most people work harder (investing more effort, time, and money) to qualify for an uncertain reward (such as a 50% chance of getting either \$150 or \$50) than they do for a certain reward (a 100% chance of getting \$100), perhaps because the former is more challenging and exciting. Uncertain rewards are harder to set up at work, but not impossible. You might “gamify” a task by keeping two envelopes at your desk—one containing a treat of greater value—and picking only one, at random, after the job is done.

Finally, loss aversion—people's preference for avoiding losses rather than acquiring equivalent gains—can also be used to design a strong external motivator. In a 2016 study scientists from the University of Pennsylvania asked people to walk 7,000 steps a day for six months. Some participants were paid \$1.40 for each day they achieved their goal, while others lost \$1.40 if they failed to. The second group hit their daily target 50% more often. Online services such as StickK.com allow users to choose a goal, like “I want to quit smoking,” and then commit to a loss if they don't achieve it: They have to donate money to an organization or a political party that they despise, for example.

## **Sustain Progress**

When people are working toward a goal, they typically have a burst of motivation early and then slump in the middle, where they are most likely to stall out. For instance, in one study observant Jews were more likely to light a menorah on the first and last nights of Hanukkah than on the other six nights, even though the religious tradition is to light candles for eight successive days. In another experiment, participants who were working on a paper-shape-cutting task cut more corners in the middle of the project than they did on their initial and final shapes.

Fortunately, research has uncovered several ways to fight this pattern. I refer to the first as “short middles.” If you break your goal into smaller subgoals—say, weekly instead of quarterly sales targets—there’s less time to succumb to that pesky slump.

## Giving advice may be an even more effective way to overcome motivational deficits.

A second strategy is to change the way you think about the progress you’ve achieved. When we’ve already made headway, the goal seems within reach, and we tend to increase our effort. For example, consumers in loyalty programs tend to spend more when they’re closer to earning a reward. You can take advantage of that tendency by thinking of your starting point as being further back in the past; maybe the project began not the first time you took action but the time it was first proposed.

Another mental trick involves focusing on what you’ve already done up to the midpoint of a task and then turning your attention to what you have left to do. My research has found that this shift in perspective can increase motivation. For example, in a frequent-buyer promotion, emphasizing finished steps (“you’ve completed two of 10 purchases”) increased customers’ purchases at the beginning, and emphasizing missing steps (“you are two purchases away from a free reward”) spurred consumption as buyers neared the goal.

This tactic can work for rote tasks (such as sending out 40 thank-you notes) as well as for more-qualitative goals (becoming an expert pianist). The person writing the notes can gain motivation from reminding herself how many she’s sent until she passes 20; then she should count down how many she has left to do. In the same way, a novice pianist should focus on all the scales and skills she has acquired in her early stages of development; then, as she improves, focus on the remaining technical challenges (arpeggios, trills and tremolos, and so on) she needs to master.

## **Harness the Influence of Others**

Humans are social creatures. We constantly look around to see what others are doing, and their actions influence our own. Even sitting next to a high-performing employee can increase your output. But when it comes to motivation, this dynamic is more complex. When we witness a colleague speeding through a task that leaves us frustrated, we respond in one of two ways: Either

we're inspired and try to copy that behavior, or we lose motivation on the assumption that we could leave the task to our peer. This is not entirely irrational: Humans have thrived as a species through individual specialization and by making the most of their comparative advantages.

The problem is that, especially at work, we can't always delegate. But we can still use social influence to our advantage. One rule is to never passively watch ambitious, efficient, successful coworkers; there's too much risk that it will be demotivating. Instead, talk to these peers about what they're trying to accomplish with their hard work and why they would recommend doing it. My research shows that when a friend endorses a product, people are more likely to buy it, but they aren't likely to if they simply learn that the friend bought the product. Listening to what your role models say about their goals can help you find extra inspiration and raise your own sights.

Interestingly, giving advice rather than asking for it may be an even more effective way to overcome motivational deficits, because it boosts confidence and thereby spurs action. In a recent study I found that people struggling to achieve a goal like finding a job assumed that they needed tips from experts to succeed. In fact, they were better served by offering *their* wisdom to other job seekers, because when they did so, they laid out concrete plans they could follow themselves, which have been shown to increase drive and achievement.

A final way to harness positive social influence is to recognize that the people who will best motivate you to accomplish certain tasks are not necessarily those who do the tasks well. Instead, they're folks who share a big-picture goal with you: close friends and family or mentors. Thinking of those people and our desire to succeed on their behalf can help provide the powerful intrinsic incentives we need to reach our goals. A woman may find drudgery at work rewarding if she feels she is providing an example for her daughter; a man may find it easier to stick to his fitness routine if it helps him feel more vibrant when he is with his friends.

## **CONCLUSION**

In positive psychology, *flow* is defined as a mental state in which someone is fully immersed, with energized focus and enjoyment, in an activity. Alas, that feeling can be fleeting or elusive in everyday life. More often we feel like Baron Munchausen in the swamp—struggling to move forward in pursuit of our goals. In those situations it can help to tap the power of intrinsic and extrinsic

motivators, set incentives carefully, turn our focus either behind or ahead depending on how close we are to the finish, and harness social influence. Self-motivation is one of the hardest skills to learn, but it's critical to your success.

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