

TEN TIPS FOR MOTIVATING YOURSELF TO PRACTISE NEW SKILLS OR PURSUE IMPORTANT GOALS – by Russ Harris

1. Link the Goal To Values

Values can provide a deep motivation that helps to sustain the practice of new skills, or the pursuit of challenging goals, even when it's boring, tedious or anxiety-provoking (as it so often is). Ask yourself: is this really important to you? What is it that matters enough, that you'd even *think about* doing something like this? What values would underlie this course of action? How would doing this make a positive difference in your life? If we can link our new behavior to something personally meaningful, we're far more likely to do it!

2. Set Goals Effectively

A wealth of research shows that if we set goals effectively, we significantly increase the chances of following through on them. A simple acronym for goal-setting is: S.M.A.R.T.

S = Specific

What specific actions will you take?

If a goal is vague and non-specific (e.g. I'm going to really be there for my kids this week) it's going to be hard to know if you have achieved it or not. So change it to a specific goal (e.g. I'm going to get home at 4pm on Friday and take the kids to the park to play basketball.)

M = Meaningful

What values will you be living by, when you do this?

If the goal is not meaningful – i.e. aligned with values – why bother? Either set a new one that is meaningful, or explicitly link the current goal to values, so it becomes meaningful (e.g. remind yourself "Doing this would be living my values of being loving and caring.")

A = Adaptive

How will this action be adaptive for your life (i.e. make your life better)? What are the likely benefits?

If the goal seems likely to have more costs than benefits – then change it. For example, if the value is justice, and the goal is to "Punch anyone who treats me unfairly", then clearly this is going to be maladaptive (i.e. make your life worse).

Be clear about the benefits, and remind yourself what they are e.g. "Practicing this mindfulness skill will help me to handle anxiety-provoking situations more effectively."

R = Realistic

Is the goal realistic for the resources currently available - which may include time, energy, money, physical health, social support, and so on?

If not, modify the goal so that it *is* realistic for the available resources; or else put it to one side and make a new goal. (Of course the new goal might be to get the necessary resources for the original goal.)

T = Time-framed

What day, date, and time will this occur, and for how long will you do it?

A time-frame contributes to the specificity of the goal.

3. Take Small Steps

The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. So if the goal seems too big, make it smaller. If ten minutes of mindfulness practice is too much, cut it back to five. If doing it daily is unrealistic, perhaps do it every second or third day, or weekly.

Ask yourself: "On a scale of zero to ten, where ten is 'I'll definitely do this no matter what' and zero is 'There is absolutely no chance I'll ever do this' – then how likely are you to actually do this?" If you score less than seven, best to change the goal to something smaller and easier.

4. Carrot Versus Stick

Many people try to motivate themselves through being harsh, judgmental, self-critical, or punitive. But if beating yourself up were a good way to change behavior, wouldn't you be perfect by now?

Learn to "drop the stick": unhook yourself from excessive expectations and harsh self-judgments, and instead practice self-acceptance and self-compassion. Then "create a carrot" by linking your action to values, and reflecting on the likely positive outcomes. For example, ask yourself, "If I do this, what will I be standing for?" or "If I do this, what will the benefits be, in the long term?"

TEN TIPS FOR MOTIVATING YOURSELF TO PRACTISE NEW SKILLS OR PURSUE IMPORTANT GOALS – by Russ Harris

4. Carrot Versus Stick- continued

Acknowledge every little step “in the right direction”. Pay attention to what you are doing, and notice what difference it makes in your life. Find ways to reward yourself for following through. These rewards may be as simple as saying to yourself “Well done. You did it!”, or keeping a record in a journal, or reporting your progress to others who are supportive.

5. Anticipate Obstacles

When you commit to a goal, it's helpful to ask yourself, “What might get in the way of that?” As the saying goes, “forewarned is forearmed”. So once we have identified obstacles to action, we can then plan how to get around them. And if there is no possible way around an obstacle? Then clearly we'll need to set a different goal, and make room for our inevitable disappointment or frustration.

Some of the most common obstacles to the intended course of action are activities that compete with it for time and energy. In such cases, we can ask ourselves, “What am I willing to give up, or do less of, or say ‘no’ to, in order to free up time and energy for doing this?”

6. Confront the Costs

Although the ‘carrot’ is far more useful than the ‘stick’, at times it is important for us to realistically and deeply connect with the costs of *not* following through. We may compassionately and gently ask ourselves, “If I keep on doing what I’m doing: What is it costing me, in terms of health/wellbeing/relationships? What am I missing out on? What will my life be like: one year from now? Two years from now? Ten years from now?”

7. Cultivate Willingness

The practice of new skills is often boring or tedious; and the pursuit of goals that pull us out of the “comfort zone”, almost always generates significant anxiety. So if we are unwilling to make room for discomfort, then obviously we will not take action. So we can ask ourselves: “Am I willing to feel some discomfort, in order to do what matters?” or “Am I willing to make room for sweaty hands, and a knot in my stomach, and a tightness in my chest, and a voice in my head that tells me scary things, if that’s what I need to make room for in order to do the things that really matter?” This of course, overlaps with our first strategy: linking the goal to values.

If you are unwilling to make room for the inevitable discomfort, you may need to a) work on acceptance skills; b) enhancing the link to your values; or c) setting an easier goal that elicits less discomfort.

8. Defuse From Reason-giving

The mind is a reason-giving machine, and as soon as we even *think* about doing something that pulls us out of our comfort zone, it cranks out all the reasons why we can’t do it, shouldn’t do it, or shouldn’t even have to do it: *I’m too tired, I’m too busy, it’s not important, it’s too hard, I’m not good enough, I can’t do it, I’ll fail, I’m too anxious*, and so on. And if we wait until the day our mind stops reason-giving, *before* we do the things that really matter in life ... we’ll never get started. So if fusion with reason-giving is a major barrier to action, then naturally we target it with defusion: e.g. “Aha! Here it is again. The ‘I can’t do it story’. Thanks, mind!”

9. Enlist Support

Social support is often hugely motivating. Can you find a partner, friend, relative, co-worker, or neighbor, with whom you can share his aspirations and achievements? Someone who will encourage and support you? Acknowledge your successes and cheer you on? Is there a group or a course you could join that might serve this purpose? Can you find an “exercise buddy” to go running with, or a “study buddy” to help you with homework?

10. Use Reminders

It’s very easy for us to forget what our goals are. So how can we create “reminders”? Can we put messages or alerts in the computer, mobile phone, calendar, or journal? Can we ask people in our support network to remind us? Can we stick up notes on the mirror or the fridge or the car dashboard? Can we put a sticker on our watch strap, or an elastic band around our wrist, or a gadget on our key ring, so that whenever we see these things they remind us of our goals?

Can we use a recurring event to cue our new behavior: for example, we might do a breathing exercise for ten minutes immediately after dinner, or as soon as our alarm clock goes off in the morning? Can we schedule the activity into a calendar or diary or onto our daily “To Do” list – and highlight it in some way, to emphasize its importance? (This of course also gives the goal a time-frame, and helps avoid competing activities.)