

Motivation: Getting Things Done

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Opening: It's not just willpower

Self-discipline is an important factor in getting things done, but just because there are things you want to get done, but don't - doesn't mean you have no willpower or poor willpower.

Think: Are there already things you (for yourself!) do on a regular basis - physical (exercise, sports), mental (reading, games, art) or spiritual (meditation, worship)? Do you get grumpy and out of sorts if you don't do those things? Look at how motivated you are!

So why can't we be as motivated about everything else we want to do?

This class came about after I wrestled with this and similar questions, about finding happiness and satisfaction. I don't have 5 Simple Things You Can Do To Accomplish Anything, but I have some ideas and concepts that have helped me clarify my thinking, and I hope they're useful to you, too.

Introductions

In addition to who you are and where you're from, please tell us 1) what you're looking for the motivation to do, and 2) *why you want to do that thing*.

I'm Teleri, from the Barony of Storvik. I'm trying to get motivated to practice my harp regularly *because* I love making music. I don't understand why I don't do it more often.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivators

Intrinsic motivators are things that make us want to do them... just because we want to. We think they're fun, or satisfying, or enjoyable, or relaxing, or (fill in the blank). The activity itself is its own reward.

Extrinsic motivators are things that make us want to do other things. Money may be the thing that extrinsically motivates you to go to a job you don't particularly love. If you won the lottery, maybe you'd quit that job. But you need money, so you go to work.

In the SCA: We don't have any strong extrinsic motivators. There are weak ones, but in my experience, weak extrinsic motivators are mostly good for *nudging*. That is - if you're already strongly intrinsically motivated to do something, a weak extrinsic motivator might help you just get to work on it already.

Telling Lord Jonathan that I'll have his tunic done by next week sets up a weak extrinsic motivator. I don't want Jon to be disappointed in me, so I'll be sure to do the work.

Did you answer the “why?” question in the introduction with anything that started with “I should...”?

Who says you should? Do you *want* to? “Should” often implies an extrinsic motivation. You don't *want* to do the thing, but someone/something is telling you that you *should*.

Tell “should” to shove off.

This is your hobby. You want it to be fun, right? Challenging, engaging, interesting, but fun. If you are trying to force yourself to do something that is not fun-for-you, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. And possibly anger and bitterness, if the results that you're expecting when you do what you “should” don't materialize.

Trust yourself. When you are ready for a new challenge, you will find yourself bored or unsatisfied with what you're currently doing. Then, maybe the thing that you're trying to force right now will look interesting and appealing. Or maybe you'll find a new interest entirely.

Importance and Urgency: Why don't I do the things I like to do?

“What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important.” - attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The “Eisenhower Decision Matrix” or “Covey's Time Management Grid” are names for a way of sorting the tasks you need or want to get done. I don't know if Eisenhower actually used a grid, but Covey certainly popularized it in his 1994 book.

It looks like this:

Important and Urgent: Things in this corner have major impacts and big penalties if you don't do them very soon. Do these things!

Unimportant and Not Urgent: Things in this corner are trivial and no one will care if you don't do them. Skip these things.

Important but Not Urgent: Most of the things we're trying to motivate ourselves to do fall here. They're important to us, we enjoy them, but there's no deadline. Nothing bad happens if we put it off until "tomorrow," except maybe we're somewhat disappointed.

Not Important but Urgent: I'm such an American that this category made no sense to me at first. How can something be urgent but not important? Aren't urgent things by definition important? Turns out - no. "Your lack of prior planning does not constitute my emergency" is a classic slogan asserting one's right to ignore personally unimportant but urgent tasks. Checking email or social media - there might be something new! - is a perpetually urgent task that's - for most of us - not actually as important as the time we devote to it.

Most of us are good at doing Important/Urgent tasks and ignoring Unimportant/Not Urgent tasks. **But we let Not Important/Urgent tasks crowd out the Important/Not Urgent ones.**

One classic way to address this problem is to **create urgency** - set a goal with a deadline on your Important/Not Urgent task, and suddenly it's urgent!

Goal-Driven Activities

I love setting goals. If I'd taught this course two years ago, it would have been nothing but goal-setting, because I believed it could do anything and everything. It can do a lot, but it has some downsides, too.

You have to set good and useful goals. Poorly-defined goals don't help at all. There's an acronym, SMART, that's frequently used to help remember what makes a goal useful:

Specific. What, *exactly*, do you want to do? "I want to make some garb" is rather vague. "I want to make some early period garb, out of natural fibers, maybe in blue? I like blue, for \$25 or less" is pretty specific.

Measurable. How do you know when you're done? Is "some garb" one tunic or four?

Actionable. Different sources use different "A" words - I like this one. Be able to take action toward your goal today. If you don't know what to do, then your first task is to find out.

I need to save \$25 for my garb. I'll start a change jar. While it's filling... hm, how much fabric will I need? I guess I need a pattern? I'll go look one up.

Reasonable. \$25 for 4 tunics might be reasonable if you have enough time to shop or scrounge for cheap fabric and then time to sew. It's definitely not reasonable the night before you're leaving for Pennsic War.

Also, be reasonable in your expectations of yourself. “Win Crown next month” or “Paint something to rival the Mona Lisa” are probably not reasonable expectations for a novice in the field. This is good for your mental health in general! When evaluating the fruits of your labors, imagine that you are looking at work done by a good friend. You wouldn’t tell your friend they were a worthless loser who can’t do anything right, would you? So don’t tell yourself that, either.

Timely. Put a deadline on it to create urgency.

Ways Goal Setting Doesn’t Work

1. For some people, goal setting just plain doesn’t work. They know they’re the ones who set the deadline, and there’s no real penalty for missing it. My suspicion is that this is tied to “weak extrinsic motivators are only good for nudging.” This sort of personal goal-setting is only likely to work if you already really want to do the thing, and just need some help focusing your efforts.
2. Being reasonable is hard! It is very easy to set a goal that isn’t reasonable. In a perfect world, as soon as you realized that your goal wasn’t reasonable, you’d either rescope your work or extend your deadline to make it reasonable, and not beat yourself up about it. But many of us have internalized that “Winners never quit and quitters never win!”, and backing off of a stated goal feels like quitting. So we tell ourselves we can do it. But we also know that we can’t, so we start to feel anxious, stressed, or even guilty. Those are painful feelings, and you know what most people do? Avoid pain! So we avoid the project/goal that is causing the pain. The deadline comes and goes, we sigh and say “Life happened,” and feel briefly miserable, but it’s better than quitting! ...right? No! Give yourself permission to re-focus your goals whenever your original goals are not meeting your needs. They work for you, not the other way around!
3. Even if you do achieve your goal, if you’re an over-achiever, the natural response is to set a new goal. Keep moving! Keep learning! Keep getting better! This is all well and good, but it can get toxic. If you are always telling yourself to “Keep getting better!” you may eventually start to hear, “You’re not good enough now!” “Gosh, gee, there’s so much neat stuff to do!” becomes, “Aw crud, I’ll never get it all done!” I call this the Hamster Wheel of Doom, and it is not fun.

Can we reconcile a good and healthy desire to grow with a good and healthy acceptance of who we are, right now?

Practice-Based Activities

I found an antidote to the Hamster Wheel of Doom on James Clear’s blog (see References), in a post where he contrasts goals and systems. “Practice” is the word I use instead of system. I don’t just mean repetitive training; I mean practice like you practice law or medicine or yoga. It’s an ongoing, continuous exploration of the thing you’re doing.

The key to good practice is to do it *regularly*.

You can have goal-directed practice, but this is different from the sorts of goals we set above. If you play music - what kinds of music do you want to play? You chose your pieces to practice from the set of all music, with an eye toward your goal of the sort of performer you want to be. An embroiderer with an interest in Tudor England will chose to practice very differently from one with an interest in Viking Sweden. A fighter who wants to develop her combination shots will do different drills than one focused on footwork technique.

But you don't set that specific, measurable goal with a deadline. You say, "I'm going to work at this for the next little while, until I'm satisfied with it."

Having a regular time for practice also helps you power through the boring parts of a given project. Even activities we love overall may have elements that aren't so much fun for us. You can promise yourself that you will devote 2, 5, 15 minutes of your practice (as appropriate) to the boring thing, and then you can do other, more interesting things. You will make slow but steady progress on the boring thing.

But now we're back where we started! Regular practice isn't urgent!

Well, shoot.

Revealed Preference and Flow

When we started class, I asked you to think of a thing you do regularly, because you like it. Did you have something?

That thing probably isn't urgent, either - and yet, you do it. You make the time for it, because it is very important and valuable to you. I can say this with some certainty, because your actions (you do this thing regularly) *reveal your preference*.

Revealed preference is a term from economics. It turns out that if you ask someone what they'd spend \$100 on, and then give them \$100, they will probably spend it on something else entirely. It's not because they were intentionally lying. An imaginary \$100 can be frittered away on anything! But a real \$100... you have real priorities, and you will put that real \$100 toward them. Your actions - what you do with the \$100 - reveal your priorities or preferences.

Your time is a resource, just like money. And it's limited. You have a 24-hour day, and I don't believe that anyone here spends any of it sitting and staring at a blank wall, wondering what to do. You're maxed out. And - here's a key thing - *all the things you do are things that give you some value*. You are doing these things because you get something out of them. Some might be duties or responsibilities - extrinsic motivators. Others are things you are intrinsically motivated to do.

If you want to start a new practice, it needs to be at least as valuable to you as the things you are doing now. Otherwise, why would you do it?

In 1996, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi published a book that summarized his own and others' research into "flow" or "being in the zone" - an optimal experience characterized by:

- "intense and focused concentration on the present moment
- merging of action and awareness
- a loss of reflective self-consciousness
- a sense of personal control or agency over the situation or activity
- a distortion of temporal experience, one's subjective experience of time is altered
- experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding"

(ref Wikipedia, "Flow")

Activities in which one experiences flow are, as the last bullet has it, rewarding. They are often described by people who experience them as peak experiences. If we can bring our practices closer to this "flow" state, might we enjoy them more? Enjoy them so much that they are more valuable than other things we are doing at present?

I don't know. I don't know if every activity we pursue in the SCA is amenable to finding flow. However, another one of Csíkszentmihályi's findings is, I think, very relevant:

Flow (or maximum enjoyment) comes when one's skill level and the challenge level of the task at hand are well-matched.

If your skill is too great, you're bored. If the challenge is too great, you're frustrated.

The R from SMART is back. *Have reasonable expectations of yourself.* If you are judging your efforts against some expert-level output and you are not an expert, you are setting the challenge too high. You will be frustrated that you never measure up.

Don't worry about not making progress. You will. When your skill has increased, you'll find yourself getting bored by your practice. You'll naturally seek out a larger challenge until you're happily playing again. You don't have to force it by frustrating yourself on too-challenging projects.

Play. When practice feels mostly like playtime, you're on the way to a high-value activity. Put the things you love most about the thing you love to do squarely front and center. *Make the process itself fun.* Forget about the outcome, and how good or bad it is. Enjoy the time you have to do the thing you love - *love the doing.*

Csíkszentmihályi's book is the one I'm most glad I've read on this journey. I highly recommend it, or even just Googling some of the commentary on his major points.

But I Still Don't Have the Time

No, of course not. Your day is already full. You need to empty some of it.

As part of the class, I've provided small notebooks and a pen. Stick these in your pocket or purse and keep a record of how you spend your free time over 3-5 days. Get a few weekdays and a day or two on the weekend (or whenever your day off it).

Don't try and change your behavior so it looks better in the notebook. Don't judge yourself. Just record. Possibly, also record how you *feel* after you've completed each activity. Are you more relaxed, more stressed, happy, sad, neutral?

Review your time log. Are there activities which take up a lot of your time, but didn't improve your mood or satisfaction much? (Are these Not Important/Urgent activities?) Are you willing to reduce the amount of time you spend on them - maybe for just a week?

For just a week - no, really! It's just a week - follow a new schedule. Reduce your low-value activities and put in the thing you want to do instead. Keep making your time log.

At the end of the week, review. Do you miss the things you minimized? Maybe they're more valuable to you than you thought. If you need time to "decompress" to keep sane, then that's what you need! Do you feel better about how you spent your time? Then resolve to keep this up for another week.

Drop the time log when it's no longer useful. But keep in the habit of asking yourself if your needs are being met by your activities. It's your life - you can change what you're doing whenever you want to. *It's not quitting!* It's growing, and sometimes outgrowing old things and finding new ones.

Be Kind to Yourself

This is your hobby. It's supposed to be fun.

I think it's worth it to do the time audit and try a week on a new schedule. Sometimes, we all fall into habits that, while comforting, aren't actually what we mean to do with our time. See what happens if you break them.

But maybe you really do need them. That's all right. Maybe now is not the best time to pursue this thing you want to do. You can acknowledge that, and stop beating yourself up over it. Some time in the future may be the right time. Check in with yourself, examine your habits, make sure they're still meeting your needs. If they're not, make changes. You're allowed.

References

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