

How to get motivated, according to science

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BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE

You make goals... but then you procrastinate.

You write a to-do list... but then you don't follow through.

And this happens again and again and again. Seriously, what's the problem?

Why are we so good at thinking of what to do but so terrible at actually doing those things?

The problem is you're skipping an essential step. Here's what it is...

The mistake every productivity system makes

Productivity systems rarely take emotions into account. And [feelings are a fundamental](#) and unavoidable part of why humans do what they do.

We can't ignore our emotions. Because of [the way our brains are structured](#), when thought and feelings compete, feelings almost always win.

And we can't fight our feelings. Research shows this [just makes them stronger](#).

...when experimental subjects are told of an unhappy event, but then instructed to try not to feel sad about it, they end up feeling worse than people who are informed of the event, but given no instructions about how to feel. In another study, when patients who were suffering from panic disorders listened to relaxation tapes, their hearts beat faster than patients who listened to audiobooks with no

explicitly 'relaxing' content. Bereaved people who make the most effort to avoid feeling grief, research suggests, take the longest to recover from their loss. Our efforts at mental suppression fail in the sexual arena, too: people instructed not to think about sex exhibit greater arousal, as measured by the electrical conductivity of their skin, than those not instructed to suppress such thoughts. [[The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking](#)]

So what does the unavoidable power of feelings mean for [motivation](#)?

In their book [Switch](#), [Chip and Dan Heath](#) say that emotions are an essential part of executing any plan: "Focus on emotions. Knowing something isn't enough to cause change. Make people (or yourself) feel something."

We need to think to plan but we need to feel to act.

So if you've got [the thinking part out of the way](#) — how do you rile up those emotions and get things done? Here are three steps:

1) Get positive



When do we procrastinate the most? When we're in a bad mood.

So procrastination is a mood-management technique, albeit (like eating or taking drugs) a shortsighted one. But we're most prone to it when we think it will actually help... Well, far and away the most procrastination occurred among the bad-mood students who believed their mood could be changed and who had access to fun distractions. [[Temptation: Finding Self-Control in an Age of Excess](#)]

Meanwhile, research shows happiness [increases productivity](#) and [makes you more successful](#).

What does the military teach recruits in order to mentally toughen them up? No, it's not hand-to-hand combat.

It's [optimism](#). So how do you get optimistic if you're not feeling it?

Monitor the progress you're making and celebrate it. Harvard's Teresa Amabile's research found that nothing is more motivating than [progress](#).

This pattern is what we call the progress principle: Of all the positive events that influence inner work life, the single most powerful is progress in meaningful work; of all the negative events, the single most powerful is the opposite of progress — setbacks in the work. We consider this to be a fundamental management principle: Facilitating progress is the most effective way for managers to influence inner work life. [[The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work](#)]

(More on how to get happier [here](#).)

Okay, so negativity isn't making you procrastinate and holding you back. But what's going to drive you forward?

2) Get rewarded

Rewards feel good. Penalties feel bad. And that's why they both can work well for motivating you.

Research shows that rewards are responsible for three-quarters of why you do things.

Researchers find that perceived self-interest, the rewards one believes are at stake, is the most significant factor in predicting dedication and satisfaction toward work. It accounts for about 75 percent of personal motivation toward accomplishment. – Dickinson 1999 [[The 100 Simple Secrets of Successful People](#)]

So treat yourself whenever you complete something on your to-do list. (Yes, this is how you train a dog but it [will work for you too](#).)

Having trouble finding a reward awesome enough to get you off your butt? Try a "[commitment device](#)" instead:

Give your friend \$100. If you get a task done by 5PM, you get your \$100 back. If you don't complete it, you lose the \$100.

Your to-do list just got *very* emotional.

(More on how to stop procrastinating [here](#).)

So you're feeling positive and there are rewards (or penalties) in place. What else do you need? How about nagging, compliments and guilt?

3) Get peer pressure



Research shows peer pressure [helps kids](#) more than it hurts them.

(And face it, you're still a big kid, you just have to pretend to be an adult most of the time — and it's exhausting.)

Surround yourself with people you want to be and it's far less taxing to do what you should be doing.

In his excellent book [The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](#), Charles Duhigg says: "When people join groups where change seems possible, the potential for that change to occur becomes more real."

[The Longevity Project](#), which studied over 1000 people from youth to death had this to say:

The groups you associate with often determine the type of person you become. For people who want improved health, association with other healthy people is usually the strongest and most direct path of change. [[The Longevity Project](#)]

And the [research on friendship](#) confirms this. From my interview with [Carlin Flora](#), author of [Friendfluence](#):

Research shows over time, you develop the eating habits, health habits, and even career aspirations of those around you. If you're in a group of people who have really high goals for themselves you'll take on that same sense of seriousness.

(More on the science of friendship [here](#).)

So we've got all three methods going for us. How do we wrap this all together and get started?

Sum up

Got today's to-do list? Great. That means the most rational thing to do now is *stop being rational*. Get those emotions going:

1. Get positive
2. Get rewarded
3. Get peer pressure

You can do this. In fact, believing you can do this is actually the first step.

What's one of the main things that stops people from becoming happier? Happiness [isn't part of how they see themselves](#) so it's harder to change.

Think of yourself as a motivated, productive person. Research shows [how people feel about themselves](#) has a huge effect on success.

For most people studied, the first step toward improving their job performance had nothing to do with the job itself but instead with improving how they felt about themselves. In fact, for eight in ten people, self-image matters more in how they rate their job performance than does their actual job performance.
- Gribble 2000 [[The 100 Simple Secrets of Successful People](#)]

Still unsure if you'll be able to beat the [procrastination](#) demon? Then skip right to #3, peer pressure.

Forward this post to at least two friends and [start holding each other accountable](#).

Now you've got something outside of yourself that's watching and motivating you. And everything is easier — and more fun — with friends.