Low on Motivation? 7 Psychological Hacks to Get Going

Even the most passionate and motivated among us have off days. We wake up feeling detached from work, or groggy, frustrated or depressed, and we can’t get into the right mindset to be productive. We might be able to go through the motions of work, but we aren’t operating at peak efficiency, nor are we enjoying what we’re doing.

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Is this you? Thankfully, even on your worst days, there are some psychological tricks you can use to hack your mind to become more motivated:

1. Visualize your long-term goals.

Research from the University of Virginia suggests that visualizing your potential future is highly motivating, even if that future is distant. Though we tend to perform our best and achieve the best outcomes when we optimize our work and focus for long-term performance, our minds are wired for short-term focus and goals. So, instead of zooming in on one task or project, think about your long-term goals, and work backward to visualize how these small steps will lead to that eventuality. Visualizing should super-charge your focus.

Long-term thinking is what Jeff Bezos used to make Amazon the tech powerhouse it is today. Since 1997, his manifesto has been “It’s all about the long term,” a kind of proactive warning to shareholders that the company is willing to sacrifice short-term revenue if that means higher long-term

gains.

2. At least start your task.

One of the hardest parts of any task, especially a challenging one, is actually getting started. Once you're in the middle of something, it's much easier to keep that momentum going. To overcome this initial hurdle, commit yourself to at least starting your task;you can always tell yourself that you can abandon it after five good minutes of actual work.

By the time those five minutes are up, you might already be so into the project that you'll naturally want to carry that momentum forward. So, start! The sooner you do, the sooner you'll achieve that flow. This charge may seem intimidating or difficult if the task is beyond your usual scope, but in the words of former Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer, "I always did something I was a little not ready to do. I think that's how you grow. When there's that moment of 'Wow, I'm not really sure I can do this,' and you push through those moments, that's when you have a breakthrough."

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3. Set a timer.

You can also motivate yourself by setting a timer,forcing yourself to work for a fixed amount of time and putting a break on the schedule for the near future. This simultaneously puts a limit on how much effort you'll need to expend and gives you something to look forward to – a break.

Studies show that the "average" optimal time for this work-break split entails working for 52 minutes and breaking for 17, but you'll likely need some adjustments to make the pattern work for you. For example, Tony Schwartz (president of the Energy Project) takes a break every 90 minutes, since he

says his alertness tends to drop off after those 90 minutes are up.

4. Tell someone what you plan to do.

Social pressure can influence your personal motivation fairly strongly. If you have a big project to do, or a major goal for the day, tell someone close to you (such as a friend, family member or even a colleague) what you intend to accomplish. Knowing you'll need to eventually report back to that person, you'll feel extra pressure to do what you said you were going to.

If you want even more pressure, consider broadcasting your goal to a whole group of people, such as the entire office. Ray Wu, cofounder of Weilos, used that online weight-loss community's platform to measure this effect. The result: Participants who actively shared their goals and progress ended up losing 1.2 pounds per week, compared to just 0.27 pounds per week among dieters not using the platform.

5. Change your "self-talk."

A comprehensive review of 47 different studies reported in the *Journal of Sports Exercise Psychology* confirmed the effects of positive and negative "self-talk" – that running internal dialogue most of us experience throughout the day. Essentially, *positive* self-talk leads to higher motivation, better self-esteem and an elevated mood, while negative self-talk leads to the opposite.

If you find yourself saying or thinking things like "This is too much," or "I'm stressed out of my mind," try rephrasing those comments to things like, "This is an exciting challenge," or "I'm going to feel great when I'm done with this." Sometimes, a simple mental change is all it takes to

radically transform your perspective.

6. Keep a task list.

Start keeping a list of tasks to do, and write down everything — even small, minutes-long tasks throughout your day. Whenever you get something done, cross it off the list or put a check mark next to it. This will help you stay organized but, more importantly, will give you a boost of motivation every time you cross something off.

In the words of April Underwood, vice president of product at Slack, “Have a clear system for to-dos: whether it’s ‘Getting Things Done’ or the ‘Checklist Manifesto,’ just have a system and stick to it.” Continued Underwood: “I have a very specific method I use in Slack and in email that works for me, and knowing I have that system keeps me from feeling overwhelmed even when I’m behind or the to-dos pile up.”

By keeping a task list, you too will be able to tangibly mark your progress, and you’ll feel better about what you’ve already achieved. You’ll also get to visualize your progress over time, which can help you keep going when you hit a wall.

7. Establish consequences.

Though reward-based systems often work better for teaching people new things, our instinct to avert loss motivates us to accomplish a goal when there are consequences for not accomplishing it. For example, in one experiment, teachers were split into two groups: one group was offered a $4,000 bonus if their students’ grades improved, and another group was actually given the $4,000, along with the threat that they would have to return the money if grades didn’t improve. Those consequences led the latter group to perform better over the semester.

So, if you want to get more things done, establish your own consequences for not getting them done.

If you find yourself chronically low on motivation and this happens relatively frequently – say, more than once or twice a week – consider this a sign of a bigger problem in your daily work life. You might be dealing with too much stress (without an outlet to relieve it), or you might be heading toward burnout.

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If that's the case, these suggested short-term hacks won't be enough to help you recover. You'll need to invest significant resources into changing your environment and your lifestyle to something more manageable, longer-term.https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/306938