How To Get Motivated For School

"I know the work is there... I know I have to do it... but I just can't get myself to get started on it."

Does this sound like you? Many people feel they “have no motivation” or “need to get motivated.” Actually, we all have motivation. It depends on what we are motivated toward! Basically, motivation is an internal process that gives behavior its energy and direction. These internal processes include our goals, beliefs, perceptions, and expectations.

Goals, Goals, Goals

A critical element of motivation is goals; it is difficult to be motivated to achieve without having specific goals. When we establish and pursue personal goals, research shows we are more attentive, expend greater effort, and increase our confidence as we make progress. If you have some sense of uncertainty or ambivalence about your goals for college or your career, this will certainly impact your motivation. In order to better define your academic goals, here are some questions to ask yourself: Why am I in college? What do I love to learn? It’s important to figure this out. If you’re satisfying a particular interest, it makes classes much more enjoyable.

Make sure to set realistic goals, so that you can maintain your energy toward achieving them. It’s also important to keep a balance between short and long-term goals: sometimes we get so caught up in the day-to-day that we lose sight of the big picture.

Beliefs, Perceptions, and Expectations

We all have beliefs about our capabilities as learners and ideas about the capabilities of others. For example, our persistence on a task is often related to how competent we believe we are to complete the task. Also, our beliefs about the causes of our successes and failures on current tasks influence our motivation and behavior on future tasks—if we feel we haven’t done well because we haven’t put in enough effort, for example, we’re more likely to work than if we believe we’re just not smart enough.

The following are examples of different sets of beliefs and perceptions that can limit present, and possibly future, academic success.

We could be motivated toward others seeing us as capable but be doubtful and defensive about our own ability. An example would be having difficulty in a class and doubting our ability to compete with other students yet putting on a good front and maintaining to others that class is going fine. Or, we could put a lot of work into the class but indicate to others that we’re doing very little. Basically, we could be putting more energy into preventing anyone from interpreting our performance as evidence of a lack of ability – being more motivated to avoid failure than to succeed.

We could care about playing it safe, or doing well enough, and not take risks or challenge ourselves. We may be bright students whose primary goal is to attain high grades and recognition from instructors. By needing to get an A in each course, we may take courses that offer little challenge or rarely read anything that is not required in a course. Thereby, we learn only what we’re told to learn.
We could believe that nothing we do really makes a difference. We may be having trouble understanding the readings or taking notes on the lectures. However we don’t attempt to seek help because we believe it is useless to try because nothing seems to work. We may sleep late, miss classes, and find ourselves falling further behind.

We may not really value academics. Enjoying college life and not wanting to let courses get in the way of having a good time, we could settle for Cs when we could attain As. We could feel especially satisfied with a grade that does not require much effort.

We could be so worried and anxious that it interferes with our success. Constantly worrying about our performance on every test or assignment, we may forget material on tests even though we prepare well. Anxiety might also lead to having trouble sleeping, constantly having stomachaches or headaches, and/or not enjoying college.

**Take a Look at Your Motivation:**

- How do you value different academic courses and tasks?
- What are your goals?
- Do you believe you can do well on different academic tasks?
- To what do you attribute the causes of your successes and failures?
- How do you feel about your academic challenges?

**Ways to Enhance Motivation**

Being motivated toward academics requires strengthening beliefs in the value of learning as well as in ourselves, while eliminating thoughts that deter us from learning. A variety of techniques can be used to strengthen these beliefs such as those below.

**Engage in supportive self-talk.** By talking to ourselves in a supportive way, we can strengthen a belief in our ability to engage in goal-oriented behaviors to achieve our objectives. After participating in a class discussion, rather than berating ourselves for not talking more fluidly, for example, we could say, “I’m practicing and learning a skill that will help me get a job.”

Self-talk can also be used to remind ourselves of the many reasons for attending college. For example, college graduates, compared to non-graduates, usually have more control over their personal lives and careers, find life more interesting, and even still in this day and age, make more money. There are costs associated with being a college student, but reminding ourselves continuously that the short-term costs are significantly outweighed by the long-term benefits will help to motivate us to do the immediate tasks related to our long-term objectives. Remember the bumper sticker: “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.”

**Image success.** Believing that we can achieve a college degree can be strengthened by imaging ourselves actually engaging successfully in the necessary academic tasks. For example, we could envision ourselves making a successful class presentation, meeting with our advisors, contributing to a class discussion, and so on.
Recall past achievements. Belief in ourselves can be strengthened by regularly reflecting on past achievements as well as on previous problems that have been overcome. Calling to mind efforts that have worked bolsters our confidence because we reinforce the expectation that they will work for us again.

Attribute causes. To maintain and strengthen belief in ourselves, it is important to attribute any success we achieve, at least in part, to our ability and effort, not solely to luck, external events, or other people. Taking credit where credit is due is simply acknowledging our role in accomplishing our goals.

The conclusions we reach about the causes of the problems we encounter can determine whether we will be motivated to solve them. When the causes are seen as temporary, external and specific to the problem at hand, we are more apt to remain motivated than when the causes are perceived as permanent, internal, and general. Suppose our goal is an “A” grade. If we perceive a poor grade on a test as a temporary setback that can be overcome by additional effort, we will be able to sustain our motivation. Or, if we perceive the cause of the grade as due in part to the noisy room, excessive heat, etc., rather than an intellectual deficit, we will believe we can do better next time when external conditions improve. This is not to suggest that we distort reality or adopt a cavalier view of life. However, when the reality is uncertain, as it often is, it is better to attribute successes and failures to causes that support positive motivation, than to causes that undermine it.

Attain goals. Self-confidence increases through the attainment of meaningful or challenging goals. Set out to achieve a number of short-term goals because achieving short-term goals provides immediate feedback and reinforcement. Belief in our ability to persevere toward a long-term goal increases as we see we’re able to tolerate the discomfort that accompanies delays in achieving our objectives.

Have role models. Belief in ourselves can be strengthened by learning what other people who have struggled to maintain their motivation have been able to accomplish. Hanging out with optimistic, proactive people, avoiding cynics who continually focus on the negative, reading biographies of high achievers, etc., reinforces the belief that, “If others can do it, so can I.”

Visualize future rewards. For example, to stay motivated when writing a term paper, we can vividly picture ourselves handing it in, receiving a good grade, and smiling as we walk on stage to receive our diploma at graduation.

Reward ourselves for success. It helps to set reasonable goals and reward ourselves when we finish them. For example, if we work on our term paper for 2 hours, we could phone and chat with a friend, or go for a short walk.

Maintaining Motivation

Staying motivated also means thinking in terms of balance. We need to maintain relationships with friends and family, and take care of our health. If you’re having difficulty, don’t hesitate to ask for help. The students who succeed are the ones who utilize the resources available to them.

Reference: