

Motivating Yourself to Study

A Guide for Students

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Back in the day when I was in high school, I suddenly became keen to score finer marks so that I could enter university in good form according to my choices. I succeeded, but along that journey I remember consulting a book on studying (whose identity will pass unnamed). On the topic of motivation to study, it had no separate section, but only a passing comment, which I remember today for its cruelty, lack of imagination and empathy, and unhelpfulness. The comment was that no one can help you with motivation to study, and that if you lack the motivation that's your fault. Blame implies that people wantonly refuse to study because they are wicked in some way. As a professional scholar, and as a teacher with some sympathy for students who find difficulty studying and would like to apply themselves more than they actually do, I in fact find that often people are blocked in their will to study by various factors. Frequently people are not *blame* for succumbing to these considerations, but merely human, or unaware of what is blocking them, or as yet not treating the issues as a serious problem, to be approached in a problem-solving way. Some people indeed do blame themselves, and then give up not least of all for that reason. And still others, including some teachers, may be content to just join in "the blame game." How destructive! I am not an educational psychologist, but an educator with some years experience as a counselor, and I can at least hope to offer advice on motivation to study that is more helpful than the "expertly" written study guide that I mentioned—which was of value in other respects, and indeed was an inspiration that helped motivate this article! The author referred to earlier probably had no problem studying and felt superior, and therefore pettily gratified, when surveying those who fell into difficulty.

Perfectionism. This can be a huge demotivator, even with people who on the surface do not seem concerned with excellence. Very often there is an intrinsic motivation to excellence, but it has been crushed or subdued, and yet perfectionism may lurk beneath the surface. Perfection can be grand. The thing about perfectionism is that it is an obsession with perfection in an imperfect world. We cannot rationally expect perfection as a general matter in a world in which so many things go wrong, and in which we find ourselves frankly imperfect. If people expect perfection, they demand perfect conditions for studying (ignoring the need to push a little bit sometimes to get into studying mode), a perfect idea for starting (even though warm-ups are often needed as the mind naturally gets into gear), and perfect performance. If the first two factors are missing, the studying might never begin. If performance seems to falter—and is actually only all too human, since to err is to learn—then the studying may suddenly cease. However, with the surrender of needing perfection this powerful demotivator itself may cease to have any effect, and give way to a healthy enjoyment of laughing at one's foibles—in a gentle way, preferably. Most people are *average*, which fact renders totally irrational the idea that everyone should pursue perfection (this insight about averageness is derived from a similar discussion in David Burns' excellent book, *Feeling Good: the New Mood Therapy*). If you accept being average as perfectly OK, you may just find a welcome

resting place from which you can launch yourself into **personal excellence**, which is so much better than perfection not least of all because it is a realistic goal. Remember that average performance compared to others is well compatible with personal excellence in one's own efforts.

Comparing oneself to others. There will always be others who perform better or worse than oneself, and often there is a mix of better and worse. Much of the contemporary economy is hyper-competitive and this only encourages such comparisons. However these comparisons are destructive. If someone performs better this can lead to feeling deflated, feeling that "gap" in a de-motivating way, and if someone does worse this can lead to complacency and gloating which also detracts from getting "real" things done. Such thinking merely endangers true productivity, equanimity, focus, and the ability to relate well to others. If someone does equally well then a mean desire to "beat" the other can surface. If you accept who you are, what you are, wherever and whenever you are, that is a good place to start that will not give rise to these destructive feelings that arise from comparing oneself to others. It makes more sense to compare oneself to oneself. That will give one a sense of whether one is making real progress, will be truly relevant to one's own performance, and will help supply one with answers as to what needs work. Once this obsession ceases, true work can better begin.

Distractibility. People vary quite a bit in this as to personality, but people who are in all ways so-called "normal" can easily create or allow distractions that can undermine the activity that is study. Do you have a quiet place to work? Are there visual distractions? Are there annoyances? If your physical space is free of distractions, what about your own mind? A lack of focus is not necessarily distraction, since one may simply have *difficulty* focusing, but focusing on something else is not going to get you walking along the road to productive studying.

Cynicism. This term is difficult to define and has many philosophical senses which are quite irrelevant to the present concern. What I mean here is a negative assumption that study is useless, or boring, or annoying, or given to other negative associations. What these are in fact are labels that plaster over someone's prospective idea of studying, and negative associations demotivate like nobody's business. Studying is not always of great interest to the student, but in those cases the study may have value as a means to something else, such as a degree in good standing which can lead to other studies or career opportunities that are of great interest. The "uninteresting" often relates to the interesting in ways that make it all of some real interest.

Lack of structure. Sometimes people are told to study, or tell themselves to study, and somehow they drift into study-like behaviours such as picking up books and then drift into phone calls or emails or television and somehow the studying dissipates. Or they go on studying until they are overtired and thus physically demotivated. Either outcome is unsatisfactory. It makes sense to schedule study activities, to let people know one is not to be disturbed within reason, to let the answering machine or the computer handle one's messages, and to clearly distinguish study from other activities such as entertainments. Limiting the time one studies is also key, otherwise one becomes tired and discouraged,

feeling guilty for no good reason. I remember a time of difficulty in completing my doctoral thesis, and it helped enormously to schedule a time for study that I could easily keep. I ended up honouring it, and felt refreshed after, and remarkably focused during the activity because I was dedicated to it. The defined study time period made it possible to feel satisfied after achieving it, which is not possible if one only drifts from one thing to another. Everyone is different so the structure of study depends partly on how oneself is structured psychologically, physically, socially, and also in part on how one chooses to structure oneself through repeated choices that lead to habits. Every time we choose this reinforces neural “wiring” in the brain, so habits have, in part, a biological basis.

Fears. This is a different problem than cynicism, which itself may feel fearless. People fear failure, how they will be “rated” by others, incomprehension, or any number of problems which may prove entirely groundless. People can indeed worry to excess. One instead can keep an open mind that there may be no problems, or that one can afford to encounter difficulties and see them as an opportunity, as Einstein put it, and deal with real problems with real solutions instead of being vaguely haunted by general fears. These will surely cramp motivation that exists, and be a positive de-motivator in relation to studying.

Ego problems. It is crucial to avoid overgeneralizations of all kinds, but many fall into the trap of making generalizations about themselves, that they are “great” or “losers” and so forth. This leads to ego problems, where one expects to be great and so cannot deal with “flaws.” Flaws in “oneself” can better be translated into the thought of “problems requiring solutions—or perhaps no solutions, since not all issues are like that.” Overconfidence can mean jumping to conclusions or trusting excessively to easy judgment, as well as obnoxiousness which horrendously interferes with study as a potentially social activity. Underconfidence—that just leads away from studying altogether. Everyone needs self-assessment, but paradoxically it should lead *away* from self in a sense and focus on particular issues, actions, problems, etc.—what works and what doesn’t? What needs improvement and what is good, and what must simply be accepted for what it is? Some people feel the need to think of themselves as great not to feel good about themselves, but because others have the expectation that they *ought* to be great as “good people,” or as the child of someone who is intellectually brilliant, etc. Studying however is impossible without some peace of mind, and a large part of that is first of all accepting what *is*, as a matter of fact, before one concerns oneself with ideas of what *ought* to be. One can best progress to a more ideal state with a firm footing in reality. Rejecting reality as it is because it is not as it “ought” to be can reach irrational extremes, and some have called it “shoulding” all over oneself. Rejecting reality then becomes destructive, demotivating, disorienting, and ego becomes lost, not feeling “great” at all. It is also an ego problem of a social nature to be afraid of being considered a “nerd.” This can actually demotivate students. A good student is just that—treat the category of nerd as an amusing stereotype that we should not use in earnest at best, and a cruel attempt to belittle scholars at worst. No one can put you down without your permission, but those who try to make others feel bad are usually academically demotivated themselves, feel badly about it, and think they will feel better by putting

others down. If you genuinely have nerdy traits such as absent-mindedness, do not fear it, but accept yourself as you are, and laugh with others who laugh with you.

Lack of priorities. Some people feel no inclination to study because they have made overly large priorities out of other worthwhile things, such as socializing, amusements, reading the news, sports, and so on. If other activities entirely absorb one, then one simply has not left room for studying. Unfortunately, the de-motivators that I am discussing can lead to studying-avoidance which itself makes studying fall to a lower priority than even the student feels right about, so all of these factors are interconnected. Any one action connected with studying needs the flow of motivation which can connect to any of the factors discussed here and more.

Hedonism. Some people see clearly the value of fun but fail to appreciate the value of work. Or they fail to distinguish enjoying something as one of life's pleasures, and taking satisfaction out of a job well done. Satisfactory study activities do not have to be "fun," although they sometimes can be, especially if one is "psyched" to study.

Being spoiled. Some students, frankly, are people who have been overindulged by parents who simply provide all needs and wants, not requiring responsibilities in any department of life, and this does not conduce towards taking responsibility for *any* work including studying. Many do not appreciate the sheer opportunity to study and what it means in comparison to many who are students but have no resources.

Fatigue. I have already discussed this in relation to structuring time to avoid overtiring oneself. Trying to do too much out of overeagerness is self-defeating and leads to the opposite of eagerness only too quickly. However, one must sometimes also honour the fact that one is too tired even to begin studying productively, and forcing oneself unkindly to do so may lead to a self-inflicted distaste for the general activity. Taking a break to take a walk, eat a healthy snack, or call a friend briefly can be just the thing for a break.

Depression. Did it ever occur to the author of the book on studying that sometimes students are de-motivated not due to any character flaws, or even necessarily being naïve about study tactics, but because the student may be ill? Depression is an illness that is intrinsically demotivating. It is not the fault of the person who has it. This illness will typically last as long as 9 months if no intervention is taken. That is enough to derail any student's studying career, at least temporarily. Often it is not even diagnosed. Effective treatment requires not just pills—although persistent trial and error in this department can be very helpful. Treatment of *the mind* as well as the brain and the body—i.e., cognitive therapy—is also key. What we think always affects what we feel, and the earlier comments on cynicism clearly illustrate this fact. If one thinks of studying in negative terms, guess how one will feel about it? Take your pick of negative feelings: fear, sadness, anger, frustration, indifference, and so forth.

Addictions. Some people are self-aware enough to realize they are addicted to alcohol, drugs, sex, foods, praise, or whatever, but they may fail to take into account that addicts

tend to obsess about the object of addiction and lose interest in everything else. Someone who underestimates the sinister power of this phenomenon may think they are not interested in studying when in fact they are merely endangering themselves. Kick any existing addictions with kindness to yourself and others and persistence—whatever else it takes.

Relationship problems. The individual student is a social creature, and key relationship issues may involve an emotional toll that hacks into study motivation. Keep relationships healthy not just because everyone deserves it regardless, but as a part of good study hygiene.

Financial instability. Although financially poor scholars can accomplish magnificent work, it cannot be underestimated how much this can interfere with studying through stress, excessive demand to work for pay, self-blame, and so forth. Do not borrow or spend too much for starters, although I will not digress here except once again to be cautious about confusing lack of motivation to study with being a “bad person” who has no such interest. People are so much more complicated than that, and what they are actually can be very different from what they are potentially.

Stress in general. Study is a form of work, but we cannot work at our best unless we also learn how to relax. Ways of relieving stress as well as causes of stress are legion, but do not forget to get enough physical exercise, as many students are wont to do, since an underexercised body is itself stressed with poor energy, concentration, feeling poorly, etc.

Excessive criticism. Is there a concern then that there is still no motivation to study? There is a tragic expression that curiosity killed the cat, which usually involves a lack of empathy for cats, but a more applicable maxim would be that cattiness may kill curiosity. Curiosity is natural and all children who are not abused or deficient in nutrition or other physical respects have and exhibit it. Many children lose curiosity due to cattiness on the part of instructors, who are supposed to be facilitating learning. I have heard that what people fear most, even more than public speaking, is criticism from others. There is a reason for this. Criticism entails a problem that one genuinely faces—or perhaps the whole category of problems, and nothing is more problematic than that! Or else it is not a genuine problem, or not perceived to be so, and then one has to satisfy someone on a point where there is nothing wrong, which itself is another kind of problem. So no wonder people fear criticisms, when feelings of self-worth, so central to one’s being, may also be at stake! People often focus on problems in a working sort of way to try to improve matters. Taken to excess, however, then one has an endless stream of problems and no satisfaction in what one is doing. Therefore, inevitably, the activity becomes unsatisfying. Therefore, predictably, one has little or no motive to do it. It is important to be positive and affirming of what one accomplishes. Not excessively so, and not making overgeneralizations about oneself as an entire person as egoistic people might be tempted—for it is particular things, traits, achievements, etc. that we have to be positive about. Criticism is of great value. It is what can make us better and also feel better about what we do. But it can be exaggerated to the point where people dread it and then they may cease to learn from it altogether in a self-defeating cycle. *Positive criticism* or praise

has a place in keeping things satisfying or gratifying. People can only handle so much negative criticism at a time so it makes sense to be generous with praise, and to pace either criticism, or more realistically, pacing one's *attention* to individual criticisms so one can handle it all a bit at a time. This applies to all things including studying: big things can be intimidating, but little logical steps that are part of a master-plan are generally inviting.

Lack of fit with abilities and interests. Sometimes one studies what one is not so able to do, or one's personality is not so suited to the subject matter. This should not be confused with lack of study motivation in general but should be respected along with one's general uniqueness.

Laziness. This is a possibility, but usually I have found that students are merely blocked in their motivation in one of the ways I have mentioned or in other respects. The author of the "self-help" book I mentioned at the beginning would no doubt be a fan of this typically unhelpful label. So there is a lack of motivation. Why? What can be done about it?

Getting motivated to study is often just a matter of realizing the reasons why one is engaged in the activity: to learn, achieve, make some career progress, eventually earn money as a means to many other ends, and so on. Getting motivated, since people are naturally curious and interested in these other rewards, is often just a case of getting "un-demotivated"! As de-motivators are progressively defused, studying can emerge as the rich, rewarding and enjoyable activity that it can be for absolutely every student. Happy studying!