

Spark



17 STEPS
THAT WILL
BOOST YOUR
MOTIVATION
FOR *ANYTHING*

DR JEREMY DEAN

Author of **PSYBLOG**

BONUS: Includes easy to follow summary of all the points

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17 Steps That Will Boost Your Motivation For *Anything*

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Published by:

PSYBLOG
Understand your mind.

Web: <http://www.psyblog.co.uk>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/psyblog>

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eBook edition: February 2016

About the author

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Introduction

Glancing at some of the many websites that have sprung up to document people's life goals, it struck me how varied and interesting our desires for the future are.

Some dream of experiences like cruising around the world, seeing the Northern Lights, backpacking across Europe or trekking the Inca trail. Others of gaining financial freedom, owning their own home and being able to afford expensive things. Still others want to improve themselves: to learn another language, to run a marathon, to advance their career or play the piano.

Social goals are popular as well: getting married, performing selfless actions, learning to appreciate your family or just making time to catch up with old friends. Still more have quirky goals like 'creating a mancave', jumping into a swimming pool fully clothed, milking a cow and even "Put a piece of bubble gum on the Market Theater Gum Wall in Seattle". (From <https://bucketlist.org/>)

These goals -- like your own -- are potentially so wide and varied, it might seem hard to address all of them with one series of instructions. But, after extensively researching the psychology of motivation for this ebook, it has become more and more clear that many of the same techniques will work for almost anything.

I very much hope this guide proves useful to you.

Dr Jeremy Dean

February 2016

How to get the best out of this ebook

Let us imagine you and I are sitting down together for a personal chat about your motivation. Face-to-face we can quickly size each other up. A few questions will help me establish your goals and where you are at with them. Then I can start working with you.

Things will have to be different here because this is a book and, unfortunately, I don't know anything about you. This means I've had to make some assumptions, which may be off at times. While the advice is as general as possible, feel free to adapt any of the steps or tips to your own circumstances. In fact, it is much better if you do.

Included in the book are exercises to accompany each step. There are only one or two for each step. I've indicated the points where it would be useful to stop and think like this: **** Stop and think ****. As long as they are relevant to you, please observe these. Try to write down a sentence or two where indicated. Or, at least imagine what you might write -- that is better than skipping the exercises all together.

I know that the temptation in these sorts of books is to skip the exercises -- along with the actual *thinking* -- to push on with the reading. The more hints and tips you read, the better it feels. Just reading the hints, tips, methods and steps will hopefully be interesting, but it may not cause much change on its own. Sparking your motivation and changing your behaviour, though, starts with your mindset. Without thinking about your mindset and challenging the status quo, it will be difficult to make any real, permanent changes.

A final word about the exercises before we get started. I know most of you will be using electronic devices, some of which may be hard to write on. I've still left spaces where it is useful to stop and think as though it were an old-fashioned paper book. I think they provide a nice visual prompt. When there is a gap in the text and an empty space, hopefully you will feel the pressure to write something somewhere -- maybe even on a piece of paper...

Part 1: Find your spark

Step 1: Identify your starting point

In this section: judge your point on the route to change and take your motivational temperature.

Your goal might be only just forming in your mind or it could be something you have been at for a while. For example, a vague plan to learn to swim could have been going around in your head, but you still have not booked your first lesson. At the other end of the scale, you might have been working for years on something -- say a home construction project -- and the shine has come off it, along with any hope of finishing.

One popular model of change used by psychologists has five different phases. It is useful to think about where you are now before deciding where you want to go. See where you would place yourself between 1 and 5:

1. **Precontemplation:** you are not even considering making any changes.
2. **Contemplation:** you are at least considering a change. Perhaps getting this ebook is the first stage of your contemplation
3. **Determination:** your plans for action are coming along but you haven't put them into action yet.
4. **Action:** you are already part way through making the change.
5. **Maintenance:** you are trying to make the change permanent.

**** Stop and think ****

The first place to stop and think is an easy one. All you have to do is pick a number between 1 and 5 corresponding to the phase of change you are in.

Below are a few suggestions about how you might like to use the ebook depending on your phase of change. Feel free to ignore these and skip right to the summary at the end or begin half-way through the ebook -- they are only suggestions.

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- If you are at **phase 1 or 2** on this model of change, then it is time to think more about a goal to motivate yourself towards. I would imagine most people reading this, though, would at least have reached phase 2 of contemplating a change. Go straight to *Step 2: Discover the change you want*.
 - For people in **phase 3**, with a clear goal, you can skip the next section on 'finding a change' and go straight on to *Step 3: Identify powerful internal and external motivations*.
 - For people in **phase 4** who have already begun taking action, I'd recommend also starting from Step 3. It will help to clarify your motivation before moving on to the later steps.
 - Even for people in **phase 5** and perhaps flagging while half-way along towards a goal, it is good to go through the same processes from Step 3 as it will help to remind you why you started in the first place. With long-term projects it is easy for that vital, initial spark to get lost along the way.

In addition, if you already have a goal or project to work on, you might like to take your motivational temperature at the start...

**** Stop and think ****

On a scale of 1 to 10, how important to you is it that you complete your goal or project?

Step 2: Discover the change you want

In this section: you will consider what kind of changes you want to make.

Hopefully you have some vague ideas in mind about making a change in your life. It could be some specific goal, action or project that you have in mind, for which you want to increase your motivation. It is important that the change you want to make is something that can be clearly articulated.

Whether or not you have got something specific in mind, our goal here is to think about the difference between how your life is now and how you would like it to be in the future. The exercise can start creating the potential in your mind towards action.

In our everyday lives we tend to see one day flowing into the next with relatively little change. We have the same meals, go to the same office, and see the same people. Life goes on, as they say. This gives the impression that things *cannot* change. But, this is just an illusion we create for ourselves, often to make the world easier to cope with.

Life is actually tremendously dynamic. Instead of looking back one week or one month, throw your mind back a decade or more and think about how much life has changed.

To take a simple example: if you can drive, can you remember what it was like when you started to learn? When I first got behind the wheel, I wondered whether I would ever be able to learn -- it seemed so complicated. Now the skill is so ingrained, I hardly give it a second thought. These kinds of contrasts, using skills you have already learned and changes that have already been made, can help put any changes you are planning into perspective.

Now it is time to think forwards instead...

**** Stop and think ****

Think about the types of actions or thoughts that you can initiate now that would set you on the path towards a desired future state.

Here are a couple more questions you can use to think about changes you might like to make:

- What would be the advantages and disadvantages of making this change?
- If everything went perfectly, how would you see yourself and your life in, say, five years time? (If this timescale is not appropriate, please replace with one that is.)

Once you have had time to consider this, try writing down a tentative project, goal or some specific behaviours. Don't agonise over the wording, just jot down a few things here:

Step 3: Identify powerful internal and external motivations

In this section: discover both internal and external motivations and how to use them to your advantage.

What are the root causes of your motivation? What deep, or not so deep, parts of yourself are involved in driving your behaviours? Without understanding this, it is hard to recruit powerful levels of motivation for your particular goal.

To get a better understanding of how motivation works, we will use a couple of handy concepts. These two concepts are extremely useful in thinking about motivation, although they may look a little simplistic at first glance. One promises to hold the key to an unlimited supply of motivation, the other can sometimes be a trap or, if used correctly, another way through to stronger motivation.

Pure, internal motivation

The first category is the pure type of motivation. This is the type that is difficult to articulate because we don't have the language for it. With pure motivations it is not about the money, the fame or to impress other people. Activities with pure motivations are done for their own sake, because they provide satisfaction just in their completion. They might include travelling for pleasure, learning to play an instrument as a hobby or idly socialising with others.

Psychologists call this type of pure motivation, 'intrinsic motivation', by which they mean you are not doing it to get something from the outside world. The reason that pure or intrinsic motivation is so important is its strength -- as supported by study after study. Working with this type of motivation, people persist longer, do better work, enjoy it more and feel a greater sense of achievement. Intrinsic motivation not only drives behaviour but also makes us happy.

At the heart of intrinsic motivation lie three factors, according to Professors Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, the theory's authors:

- **Competence.** We want to be good at something -- but it needs to be something we find just hard enough. Things that are too easy don't give us a sense of competence.
- **Autonomy.** We want to be free and dislike being controlled. When people have some freedom -- even within certain non-negotiable boundaries -- they are more likely to thrive.
- **Relatedness.** As social animals we want to feel connected to other people.

Given that these factors underlying intrinsic motivation are basic human needs, it is not hard to see why following them makes us happy. We want to be good at something, free to do it how we like and to have a connection to others.

**** Stop and think ****

Before we move on to the second type of drive, as an exercise, think about something that you already do for its own sake and see if it fulfils one or more of these basic drives. Most hobbies usually fall into this category.

External motivation

In an ideal world we'd all stick to doing stuff driven by our intrinsic motivations and hang the rest. As I'm sure you've noticed, though, the 'ideal world' does not exist.

This is where the second category of motivations comes in. It is this second category that tends to cause the problems. When people are trying to get something in the external world that they want -- usually money and/or status -- their behaviours become unhitched from intrinsic motivations. The problem is that we all need things from the outside world to survive. Only a few can live on the proceeds of pure, internal motivations -- more's the pity.

So, quite naturally, we compromise. Nothing wrong with that, up to a point.

The danger lies in getting too far away from intrinsic motivations, abandoning things which we enjoy doing for their own sake to be replaced with more lucrative activities. At the extreme, jobs become joyless treadmills which only serve to fill the bank account. Meanwhile, hobbies and other 'pointless' pastimes are abandoned as they only seem to drain the bank account.

Study after study finds that 'extrinsic' motivation is generally the 'bad' sort. When people feel they are being forced into an activity, they have less enthusiasm for it. Not only this, but external motivators can even destroy activities that we once used to enjoy. For example, hobbies which used to give pleasure can become drudgery once payment is received for them. One study has even found that children draw less when simple rewards like gold stars are introduced for an activity they previously did for 'free'.

Your motivation

**** Stop and think ****

Now we return to your specific goal. Think about the reason(s) why you want reach your goal. What is it about your goal that is important to you and what do you hope to get out of it? This is a work in progress statement. Over the next few pages we will think about this and perhaps refine it. But just for now, get something down so that we can work with it.

With your statement in mind, we will do a couple of worked examples, applying what we know about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to these, so that you can do the same thing with your motivations. This will help you identify the strongest motivations for you.

Here is the first of two examples:

- I want to work harder, so I can get a promotion, so I can earn more money for my family.

Perhaps you have noticed that this one looks like an example of the 'bad' sort of external motivation. It appears that the aim is to get something from the external world (the promotion and more money), even if it is to provide for the family.

Like many real-world motivations, though, it is complicated. If the work is unsatisfying and the long hours leave you little time to spend with your family, then this does indeed look like the bad sort of motivation.

On the other hand, if the work is reasonably satisfying and the hours allow enough family time, then the promotion and the money, while important, don't have the same weight in the equation. In other words: internal motivations are higher than external. That is especially true since taking care of a family is probably an internally satisfying motivator in itself.

Let us turn to a second example:

- I want to learn to play the double bass so I can form a jazz band and tour the world.

Learning a musical instrument is usually done for its own pleasure: you can't make much money being a musician. But, wait a minute: some people do learn instruments as a means to an end. What if the real driver is to court the public's adulation, to be desired and to be rich and famous? These would all be external motivators, the kind that tend to reduce people's enthusiasm for the activity itself.

Hopefully what you are seeing from these two examples is that internal and external motivators can be difficult to identify and disentangle. Not only that, but one type of motivation can slowly morph into another over time. For example, things originally we did for their own sake can become a chore once we are paid for them. More positively, sometimes things we once did just for the money can become intrinsically motivated. This

latter, magical transformation is most fascinating and probably happens because the activity satisfies one or all of the three basic human needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness.

Think about your own goal for a moment and try to identify the different types of internal and external motivators that *might* be operating. Don't worry about whether they actually are or not, just think about potential motivators. Try to come up with a few internal and a few external. They may well include some of the usual suspects -- learning, money, self-improvement and providing for others.

With these in mind, try to do the sort of analysis I have just done. Imagine that you are trying to catch yourself out here. Assume you have multiple motivations, some 'good' ones and some 'bad'. The reason we are doing this is so that you have greater self-awareness. I don't expect your motivations to be entirely pure: if they are, perhaps you are not being honest with yourself? For example, I enjoy writing and I get a lot out of it personally, but I would write a *lot less* if I received no income from it.

**** Stop and think ****

This is what we've been building up to. It is time to write a couple of motivational statements -- one that contains the 'good' motivation and one the 'bad'. If you want to write more than one of each, that is fine. You don't need to worry about the form of the words too much, just get something down quickly.

These statements are your reason why. They cover both your internal and external motivation for what you want to do. This simple process of clarification can be powerful for people because it helps them realise what it is they want and what is driving them forward. The stark contrast between the two should also provide a clue as to how the goal or activity are driven by both deep, internal human requirements -- for autonomy, competence and relatedness -- and how it is driven by external motivators from the outside world.

The problem of belief

One of the biggest killers of motivation is lack of belief. It can be hard to get started when the task seems so big and the will to achieve so weak. It is easy to get stuck in a kind of vicious circle. First, the mind throws up all kinds of roadblocks and problems. Then you hit the first setback and it seems like all your worst fears are coming true. Giving up can quickly feel like the best option, even when you have only just started.

Lack of belief does not always come at the start: it can creep up on you over time. Once the initial enthusiasm of a new project is under way, who has not sometimes experienced doubts starting to edge in? How long is this going to take? Is it really worth the effort? Do I have the time? And, the big one: will I really be able to do this?

Of course, you do not know if you can do something until you have done it. But by then it is done so the belief is bound to be strong!

It reminds me of the eternal dilemma of an inexperienced job-seeker trying to get their first job in an industry. Employers demand experience, but will not give the inexperienced a job so they can gain the vital experience. Yet people do get jobs (and not all of them because their mother or father owns the company!). Similarly, people do motivate themselves to incredible feats despite not knowing if they can achieve them when they start.

What we need is a way to scaffold our first faltering steps at some new project. We need some motivational equivalent of work experience: something to get us started on the long road.

Step 4: Modelling

In this section: you will set both a mastery model and a coping model to help you learn from others.

Human beings have a tremendous capacity for learning from each other: we often learn best this way. When we see someone take a particular series of actions and achieve the desired goal, it gives us hope we can do the same.

But there is a nasty catch here as well. Using someone who is really good or accomplished as a model can be disheartening. Seeing how well they perform can give us that old sinking feeling. Comparisons with relative masters in any area can exaggerate the gap between where we are and the heights they have achieved.

For example, the budding tennis player might think that Roger Federer is a pretty good model. The problem is that Federer is a genius and way out of most people's league. In fact, compared to the standard at a regular tennis club, the same can probably be said about most other top professional tennis players.

That is why it is better to choose a model who is more similar to you, but further along the road to where you want to go. When people are starting out on a new project, what they need are coping skills. The beginner's problems are not always the same as the expert's problems. The beginner does not even know what problems he or she will face, while the expert may well have forgotten.

Another advantage to using someone closer to you as a model is that it is easier to get support from them. Federer is probably a little busy to hang out, but people at the local tennis club will be happy to give you a few pointers. The sense of social support that others can provide -- especially when the problems hit -- can help bolster self-belief.

So, modelling can give us hope that we can learn, as long as we choose someone who is similar enough to ourselves. That similarity can provide the confidence that is required to push on.

There is nothing wrong with having a mastery model as well: following someone who is an expert is fascinating and can prove inspiring in the right circumstances, even if their skills and knowledge can be depressing at times.

**** Stop and think ****

Let us firm this up and write down a couple of names. First here is a slot for your mastery model. This is the person who is already doing everything you want to do (maybe more):

Second, write down your coping model. This is the person (or a group) who is possibly doing better than you, but still dealing with the same kinds of problems. Hopefully this person (or group) is the kind you feel you could become in the near future.

Step 5: Getting started

In this section: you will identify some "if...then..." statements and develop a devil-may-care approach.

At the start of a new project, there is a tendency to mentally rehearse the barriers to be overcome. Avoid too much of this.

It might seem strange to have a psychologist telling you that it is better to avoid issues, but here it is! At the start it can be better to avoid thinking too much about any problems you might face. The reason is that some research has found that barrier identification does little for self-belief. Naturally, it is a downer thinking about all the things that can go wrong.

At the same time, though, how will you prepare for problems if you fail to anticipate them? It is like you are damned if you do and damned if you don't.

The best advice here is to bias yourself towards a devil-may-care approach. Some thinking about how to overcome the most basic barriers towards your goal is fine, but do not get carried away. This will depend a lot on your personality. Some people throw themselves into new activities, while others do a lot of planning. In general it is better to throw yourself in, rather than spend too much time thinking about problems.

Activities, projects, skills and so on all gain from momentum. There is one little trick you can use to keep the momentum going after getting started. That is to use the memory of the last effort to motivate the next one. Studies have shown that just thinking back to one single previous bout of exercise motivates people to raise their exercise levels in the future. It is better if this memory is positive, but even thinking back to how awful it was last time is better than not thinking about it at all.

Remember that it is impossible to gain any momentum at all if all your time is spent thinking about problems. Far better to get started very badly than to be extremely well-prepared, but end up doing nothing.

One of the best ways of getting going is to set yourself some "if...then..." statements. This is where particular actions are connected to particular situations. These are useful because they can create a solid association between specific situations and specific actions. I go into quite a lot of detail on these in [my book on Habits](#), but here are a few examples.

If someone has a goal to lose weight, they might say to themselves: "If I feel hungry between meals, then I will eat an apple." On top of this, they might also use: "If I'm in the bathroom in the morning, then I will weigh myself." These are like mini-goals with very specific instructions. You can come up with as many as you like.

Consider when and how you will perform the necessary actions or thoughts for the change you want to make. The "if...then..." statement should be as simple and memorable as possible. There is no need to complicate it: there just needs to be a connection between a

situation in which you find yourself (say, bored after lunch) and an action you can perform (say, practice the piano).

**** Stop and think ****

Try writing down a couple of "if...then..." statements below. Don't worry if these are less than perfect, get a couple of things down and you can tweak them later. Often "if...then..." statements take a little adjustment to make them work properly. This is perfectly normal.

Promise yourself that at the time, come what may, you will get started. All the better if the statements refer to a regular slot in your day or week.

Step 6: Self-affirmation

In this section: you will learn the best way to use self-affirmation to boost your motivation.

It has become something of a cliché to mention self-affirmation in a self-help book. Telling yourself "I can do it!" or something similar is one of the most overused instructions in the area. That is why I'm happy to report that there is a better way -- or at least a tweak on the formula.

Turning a self-affirmation into a question is better than simply using a statement, research reveals. The reason seems to be that questions are more likely to build motivation than statements. Here are a few examples:

- "I will paint the house at the weekend."
- "Will I paint the house at the weekend?"
- "I am going to practise the saxophone on Sunday afternoon."
- "Am I going to practise the saxophone on Sunday afternoon?"

Studies find that the questions work better than the statements. This seems to be because people generate higher intrinsic motivation or internal motivation when they ask themselves questions.

**** Stop and think ****

Try writing down a few questions you can use now. These should be as specific as possible, including the time and place where you want to perform a specific behaviour. These could just be adaptations of your statements in step 5.

There is also nothing wrong with considering a few general self-affirming statements to help boost your motivation. These can help you to see yourself in a more positive light and to recognise genuine strengths and encourage. This will help you drive towards your goals. They do not necessarily need to be repeated as a kind of mantra, it is more that composing them can prove a useful exercise in recognising strengths.

**** Stop and think ****

Write one or two short statements below that connect your skills and experience to the goal or project you are trying to complete.

Step 7: The backup plan

In this section: you will learn the surprising motivational benefits of a backup plan -- even if you never use it.

Everyone has a kind of internal sensor that tells them if their plans are going well...or not. When things start to go wrong there is not always a specific moment of realisation, but the inner pessimist certainly notices. Whether quickly or slowly, energy for the new project starts to leak away. The inner pessimist starts to talk our plans down, tell us how little progress we have made and how weak-willed we are. Making a backup plan is one way to fight the inner pessimist.

Backup plans, of course, give us alternate paths to reach our goal, but that is not the main reason they are useful. Backup plans can actually help feed our motivation for our main plan. This might seem counter-intuitive, but think about it for a moment.

Our motivation to succeed is heavily tied in with our expectations of success. No one drives to a shop that they are pretty sure is closed. What feeds our motivation is knowing that we have a good chance of achieving the goal. It sounds obvious, but it leads to a non-obvious conclusion. It means that a little more time spent thinking about a backup plan or alternative ways to get where you are going will help you, even if you never have to actually use them.

Psychologists have tested this by having some people come up with backup plans and others not. Under experimental conditions it is the people with backup plans that have more motivation for their task. Crucially, however, people in these experiments never actually use the backup plans. They only have the feeling that there is more than one way to get where they are going. It is probably this sense of having options which gives the backup plan its power.

The experiments do reveal one twist in the tail, though. As people get closer to their goal, creating backup plans starts to demotivate them. So, if you are already a fair way along towards your goal, backup plans are probably best avoided. Generally speaking, choices are more pleasurable -- and more motivating -- at the beginning of a project. But once we are on the road to success, options go from being a pleasure to a pain.

**** Stop and think ****

Now it is time to stop and have a think about your backup plan, and sketch it out here. Avoid waiting until the main plan is going wrong or failing, make the backup plan shortly after the main plan. Just a sentence or two will do at first, to get your mind thinking in this direction.

Step 8: Engage other people (or not)

In this section: consider whether other people can be useful in helping you towards your goal.

This book is mostly about ways to fire up motivation in your own mind. All the mental exercises, questions, perspective shifting and so on can be done by you right here, right now. No fancy gadgets are required, nor is having access to anything more amazing than your own brain (which, it has to be admitted, is pretty amazing!). This section is the only exception.

Not everyone will want -- or be able -- to get someone else involved in their project or goal. But other people can be handy sometimes. It will depend on your type of project -- some just don't lend themselves to collaboration or have much of a social element. Still, even telling other people about individual or personal projects can be motivational. The simple process of sharing triumphs and disasters and just knowing that someone else knows can be beneficial. Certainly, social support has repeatedly been shown to reduce psychological distress.

One study of joining online social networks has even found that these can be beneficial in pumping up motivation. Over time, the research found, people put randomly into online social networks together kept each other updated on their progress. This led to increased levels of motivation.

Hopefully 'other people' can be useful to you, but one word of caution. While many are supportive, helpful and nurturing, not everyone is like that. Some only serve to reduce your motivation by sucking out your enthusiasm or by undermining your efforts in some other way. It seems some people -- who knows why -- would rather see you fail than succeed. Although these kinds of people are often good people, they may be best kept out of your motivational inner circle.

**** Stop and think ****

Decide if there is someone -- or a group of people -- that could help keep you motivated. It might be your family, work colleagues or some other social group. This could be the same as the 'coping model' you identified earlier or it could be a completely different person or group.

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