

Maintaining Motivation: It's a Marathon!

Stephen R. Balzac

School. It can be fun and exciting. It can also feel as though it stretches out into infinity. Whether public, private, or homeschool, elementary, middle, high school, or college, there are times when classes seem to go on forever, when there just seems to be no end in sight. No matter how much fun a project is, eventually deadlines come up and work comes due. The stress can turn an enjoyable experience into a torturous journey that destroys motivation. Some kids end up moving from crisis to crisis, always rushing to finish assignments before starting the next. Others end up sacrificing their enjoyment of the educational experience for knowledge, believing that is the price that must be paid.

Sadly, in any non-trivial educational environment, there will be stressors that undermine motivation and endanger enjoyment of the learning process. Reducing them as much as possible is a good start, but it isn't enough: if the education is challenging, there is going to be stress. It's important to actively take steps to maintain and increase motivation:

- Find a cheerleader or coach. This could be a parent, older sibling, close relative, a teacher, or another adult with whom you have a good relationship. Your coach needs to be someone who can help you maintain focus and remain upbeat even when things are going poorly. Their job is to help you build confidence, establish routines, and set realistic, difficult goals. They need to remind you of past successes, not past failures. The latter only decreases motivation and confidence, while the former builds self-efficacy.
- Create a vibrant vision of the future: remind yourself why you became excited about learning in the first place. If you weren't excited to begin with, work with your parents, friends, teachers, coaches, or others to help build an exciting vision of the future. Refresh and revise that vision as your schooling evolves. Imagine success; daydreaming is a powerful way to stay in touch with your long-term goals.
- Get out of the house. Spend time with friends, do something fun. Online social networks are okay, but face-to-face interaction is extremely valuable as well. Occasionally do things with people you don't see on a regular basis. Look for out of the box ways to expand your knowledge.
- Put a picture of someone important to you in your room or somewhere where you can see it. Use that picture to help you remember your goals and dreams.
- Don't allow the unpleasant tasks to fill the day. Face it, no matter how enjoyable the class, there are times when some of the work is really not much fun. If the unpleasant parts are allowed to fill the day, motivation swiftly declines. It's much better to allocate a certain amount of time each day to performing unpleasant tasks: when you promise

yourself you'll work on something for "fifteen minutes," you're more likely to continue well past that than if you leave the time open-ended.

- Take breaks. Although this may sound counter-intuitive, stepping away from your work is one of the most powerful means of making progress. An hour or two break to go for a run or read a book can yield greater progress in solving a problem than eight hours spent banging one's head against the wall.
- Take your hobbies seriously, but don't over schedule. Strange as this may sound, people who are devoted to a hobby or sport are more productive not less: knowing that practice is at 7pm means that there is greater motivation to finish your work in time. Leaving in time for practice, whether or not the work gets done, actually increases motivation to do more the next day. It's when there is nothing else on the schedule that work expands to overflow the time available.

As the saying goes, success is a marathon, not a sprint. Keeping motivation alive and well is key to crossing that finish line.

Stephen Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker, and psychology professor. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepsahead.com), based in Stow MA. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.