

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

PERSONAL COUNSELING CENTER

Don't Go Chasing Motivation (or Waterfalls)

Hey Everyone,

I hope the first newsletter of the “summer” finds you well. It looks like it will be warm here for the next couple of days but as I am writing this newsletter it is still cold (better than what it was). I swear we Michigan folks are impossible to please. I hope your semester ended well and you are not looking forward to a well-deserved break.

A survey was recently sent out to students asking them how distance learning and staying at home was going. There were about 900 students that responded, and those results were forwarded onto our office as some of the concerns were mental health related. There were two topics that stood out to me as things worth addressing in Newsletter format. I will cover the first one today, and the second next week (stay tuned!). As the title indicates today, we are going to be talking about motivation and if you understood the song reference in the title you are officially as old as me....and awesome!

So, motivation. What is it? How do you “find” it? How do you know when you are motivated? When we talked about motivation today, I want you to think about it as the feeling or urge you get to “do” or accomplish something. “I have motivation to mow the lawn”. “I am motivated to work out”. Interestingly, I believe most people miss the most important aspect of motivation: **It's a lie**.

Your initial reaction to that may be “What?!?! Andy that's not true!” “I feel motivation all the time!”. Follow me on this one. Think to yourself, what are you really motivated to do? What do you just love to do that you feel that urge to get out of bed and go accomplish? If your answer was homework, writing papers, reading textbooks, or going to work, I would be highly suspicious. Typically, we are motivated to do things that we either really enjoy doing i.e. I am motivated to cook delicious food, or we are motivated to do things that have some form of instant gratification associated with the task i.e. I am motivated to eat delicious food. I can't tell you the number of clients I work with that are upset that they lack motivation to write 10 pages papers. Yeah, that does not sound like a great time, why do you expect to be super motivated?

There is a deeper clinical layer here as well. I don't have the page space to fully breakdown what anxiety is both neurologically and evolutionarily. An extremely watered-down explanation is that Anxiety is the thing your brain does when it feels like you are about to experience pain (physical and/or emotional). A fun one-off symptom of anxiety is **anxious avoidant behavior**. Your brain by default wants to try and convince you to avoid things that make you feel anxious. If you think about it, it makes sense.

Anxiety happens when our lives are in danger, so a natural behavioral response is to avoid the thing that is dangerous (or that causes us pain). Most clients I work with that insist they are procrastinators are typically struggling with some level of anxiety as well (coincidence? I think not). If thinking about homework makes you feel anxious, naturally you are not going to feel motivated to complete the assignment. Instead, your brain is going to try and convince you to stay the hell away from the textbook. The lie we tell ourselves, and the one we must overcome, is that we can't do anything unless we feel motivated. The truth is we can do all kinds of things while lacking the motivation to do them.

I first want to help you reframe the idea of motivation. Rather than seeking or waiting on motivation to complete a task, how can you increase your "discipline"? Discipline is the act or behavior of doing something even when you don't want to. It takes discipline to get yourself out of bed in the morning and work out. It takes discipline to turn down a night out with friends (hopefully one day again) and stay in to read or study. A way you can increase your discipline by talking to yourself out loud. Acknowledge that some things must be done even when you don't want to, and they aren't fun. Say "I don't need to feel motivated to complete this, it doesn't have to be fun, but I will do it". "Where do I start". It is more powerful than you think to just acknowledge things out loud. Writing papers is not a fun way to spend your time (for most of us) and that's ok, we can still get our work done.

There are a couple of strategies to use when hoping to increase the allusive motivation. The first one is trying to couple your unmotivated activity with another activity that you are more motivated to do (or that is more fun). As an example, doing the dishes isn't fun, but watching Netflix is. So, when I don't want to clean my kitchen, I will turn on Netflix to watch as I am doing the unfun chore. Find things you can add to your homework routine that may make it better. This can be challenging depending on the task.

Chunking up work is a good strategy to use. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. Breaking up large tasks into small manageable segments or create a to-do list style organization may help you feel less overwhelmed. It may help you build a road map as to where to start. Writing down how you plan to approach a large assignment (like an outline) may also help you collect and organize your thoughts making it easier to start.

Another strategy to increase motivation is to build motivation as you go. I find that starting a workout is hard, but once I am halfway through, I feel more motivated to keep going. If you want to work out everyday of the week, try to build momentum. The motivation will grow the more times you are successful. Make sure you affirm your progress as well. Once you have finished the first 5 pages of the assignment, take a second and remind yourself that you are halfway done (assuming your paper needs to be 10 pages long).

Limiting distractions are a key part of increasing motivation. If you are doing work on the computer, don't have social media tabs up. Make sure your phone is not within arms reach (probably just turn it off). Let those around you know that they can't come distract and tempt you. The more you can eliminate outside distractions and temptations the easier you will find it to focus on the task at hand and increase your motivation. This also connects back to the anxious avoidance concept. Your brain is

not going to communicate to you “Hey Andy, that term paper is going to murder you! Stay away from it”. Instead your brain will play tricks on you such as “I am just going to watch one more episode of the office, but THEN I will get the homework started”. “I can’t do homework on an empty stomach; I will eat quick and THEN I will finish the paper”. “I am super tired; it makes more sense to just sleep now that way I can wake up in the morning and finish those problems”. Sound familiar? Knowing how your brain tries to convince you to avoid tasks and actively eliminating those distractions as options will help you be more disciplined.

Show yourself compassion and have patience. Increasing your discipline is not always enjoyable because typically it involves completing tasks that don’t always bring joy. Try to build in reward systems for yourself to positively reinforce the discipline behavior. The approach may look different person to person but ultimately, we all have to force ourselves to sit down, put the phone away, close out YouTube, and get that S!@# done.

Here are some additional resources if you are feeling motivated (see what I did there) to learn more. A TedTalk [Here](#) about self-motivation as well as a different TedTalk about how to motivate yourself to change behaviors [Here](#). An interesting article on five tips to improve motivation [Here](#). Forbes has a list of 7 ways to increase your motivation [Motivation is a Muscle](#).

Remember, the lie we tell ourselves is we must be motivated before we start. Your homework this week is to increase your discipline. Start the task that you aren’t motivated to do and see if once you get started, the momentum helps you carry it out.

Take Care of Yourselves and Wash Your Hands,

Andy