

# TEN TIPS FOR MOTIVATING YOURSELF TO PRACTISE NEW SKILLS OR PURSUE IMPORTANT GOALS – by Russ Harris

## 1. Link the Goal To Values

Values can provide a deep motivation that helps to sustain the practice of new skills, or the pursuit of challenging goals, even when it's boring, tedious or anxiety-provoking (as it so often is). Ask yourself: is this really important to you? What is it that matters enough, that you'd even *think about* doing something like this? What values would underlie this course of action? How would doing this make a positive difference in your life? If we can link our new behavior to something personally meaningful, we're far more likely to do it!

## 2. Set Goals Effectively

A wealth of research shows that if we set goals effectively, we significantly increase the chances of following through on them. A simple acronym for goal-setting is: S.M.A.R.T.

### *S = Specific*

What specific actions will you take?

If a goal is vague and non-specific (e.g. I'm going to really be there for my kids this week) it's going to be hard to know if you have achieved it or not. So change it to a specific goal (e.g. I'm going to get home at 4pm on Friday and take the kids to the park to play basketball.)

### *M = Meaningful*

What values will you be living by, when you do this?

If the goal is not meaningful – i.e. aligned with values – why bother? Either set a new one that is meaningful, or explicitly link the current goal to values, so it becomes meaningful (e.g. remind yourself “Doing this would be living my values of being loving and caring.”)

### *A = Adaptive*

How will this action be adaptive for your life (i.e. make your life better)? What are the likely benefits?

If the goal seems likely to have more costs than benefits – then change it. For example, if the value is justice, and the goal is to “Punch anyone who treats me unfairly”, then clearly this is going to be maladaptive (i.e. make your life worse).

Be clear about the benefits, and remind yourself what they are e.g. “Practicing this mindfulness skill will help me to handle anxiety-provoking situations more effectively.”

### *R = Realistic*

Is the goal realistic for the resources currently available - which may include time, energy, money, physical health, social support, and so on?

If not, modify the goal so that it *is* realistic for the available resources; or else put it to one side and make a new goal. (Of course the new goal might be to get the necessary resources for the original goal.)

### *T = Time-framed*

What day, date, and time will this occur, and for how long will you do it?

A time-frame contributes to the specificity of the goal.

## 3. Take Small Steps

The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. So if the goal seems too big, make it smaller. If ten minutes of mindfulness practice is too much, cut it back to five. If doing it daily is unrealistic, perhaps do it every second or third day, or weekly.

Ask yourself: “On a scale of zero to ten, where ten is ‘I’ll definitely do this no matter what’ and zero is ‘There is absolutely no chance I’ll ever do this’ – then how likely are you to actually do this?” If you score less than seven, best to change the goal to something smaller and easier.

## 4. Carrot Versus Stick

Many people try to motivate themselves through being harsh, judgmental, self-critical, or punitive. But if beating yourself up were a good way to change behavior, wouldn't you be perfect by now?

Learn to “drop the stick”: unhook yourself from excessive expectations and harsh self-judgments, and instead practice self-acceptance and self-compassion. Then “create a carrot” by linking your action to values, and reflecting on the likely positive outcomes. For example, ask yourself, “If I do this, what will I be standing for?” or “If I do this, what will the benefits be, in the long term?”