

MAINTAINING MOTIVATION IN GRADUATE SCHOOL

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What is motivation?

Motivation is the desire to act toward of a goal. Motivation is a fluctuating state, not a permanent personality trait; it is fluid and changeable. Across the long time-frame of graduate studies, the level of motivation a person experiences changes in response to the myriad of experiences and changing levels of confidence (Morton and Thornley, 2001). Motivation is viewed as important for surviving the multiple stages within doctoral studies (Geraniou, 2010).

Traditionally motivation has been described as a uni-dimensional concept, having two types:

Intrinsic: inner, belonging naturally. The drive to act comes from values based rewards such as personal enjoyment or satisfaction.

Extrinsic: coming or operating from outside. Tangible rewards sustain activity such as grades, pay or recognition from others.

Both forms of motivation are appropriately used in different situations. A number of studies have shown:

- people with higher levels of intrinsic motivation are happier creativity is fostered through intrinsic motivation
- intrinsic motivation is associated with lower levels of burnout (Pisarik, 2009) extrinsic motivators can increase the output of work, at least temporarily extrinsic motivators are useful in teaching new skills
- increasing the level of incentives reduces internal drive, and performance

For an amusing graduate student blog, read [“Looks to be intrinsic.”](#)

In the TEDTalk [“On the Surprising Science of Motivation,”](#) Pink presents research done by Ariely, Gneezy, Loewenstein, and Mazar (2005) on the negative impact of higher rewards on performance.

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I. Motivation theories

There are many theories of motivation: incentive theory, goal-setting theory, cognitive-dissonance theory, and need hierarchy theory, to name a few. For an overview of some key theories, see [Strategies for Managing Change](#) or [Wikipedia's entry](#).

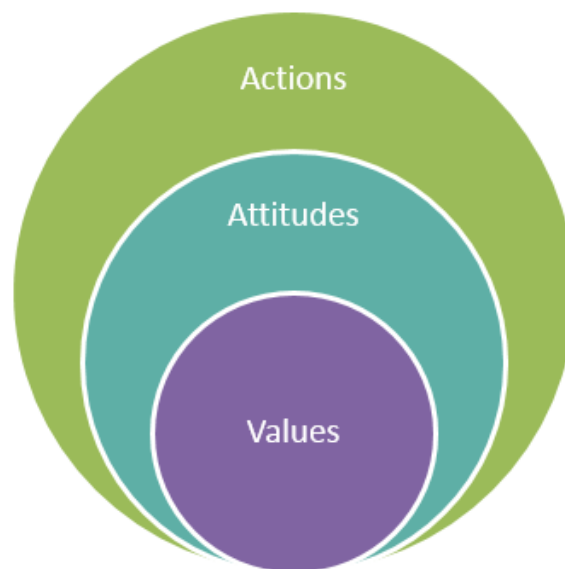
In this module we are particularly interested in an area of need theory called **Self Determination Theory** (Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000) as it speaks to the graduate student experience.

Self Determination Theory focuses on the importance of **intrinsic motivation** in driving human behavior. It posits a natural tendency toward growth and development. Unlike other theories, however, it does not include any sort of 'autopilot' for achievement, but instead states individuals require **active encouragement** from the environment.

Self Determination Theory views motivation on a multi-dimensional continuum of increasing self-determination and self-motivation. Dimensions include:

- the target behavior: not self-determined / self-determined
- motivation source: amotivated / extrinsic / intrinsic
- regulation style: not regulated / externally regulated / internally regulated
- locus of control: impersonal / external / internal

As a behaviour or thought becomes more integrated and internalized into an individual's value system, there is a shift in all dimensions towards more internal regulation and control. This allows the behaviour to be maintained with minimal support from the external world, ie. it is sustained through intrinsic motivation.



E.G. You are submitting a paper for publication. You do it because:

- **Extrinsic motivators:** It's a degree requirement. It will impress your supervisor.
- **Intrinsic motivators:** Preparing the paper helps you improve research and writing skills necessary for your career. You feel a sense of accomplishment, and want to show colleagues what you value about this research.

For maximum self-motivation and self-determination to occur, certain innate psychological needs must be met.

1. The urge to direct our own lives (i.e. Autonomy)
2. The desire to get better and succeed at something we care about (i.e. Mastery or Competence)
3. The wish to connect with others or act in service of something larger than ourselves (i.e. Relatedness)

What does this understanding of motivation mean for graduate students, supervisors, and departmental administrators?

Being a successful graduate student requires you to develop autonomy, independence and high levels of self-regulation. You are expected to manage your degree with little direct intervention from faculty. Supervisors often remark that students are surprised when they are given so much autonomy. However, this independence requires you to become more self-determined and self-motivated.

Conversely, active encouragement from the environment is also required for positive outcomes at grad school. This means the student, supervisor, department and school have to balance student/supervisor relationships: a collaboration of students working alone to try things out and make mistakes, and a supervisor readily available who can be called on when required.

Because graduate work requires high levels of creativity, problem-solving, and concentration, students are most likely to be motivated to sustain their work when they can:

- Work autonomously
- Develop a collaborative relationship with their supervisor
- Feel a sense of worth in and belonging to their project, department, and school
- Improve skills and knowledge in a safe (i.e. room for mistakes) learning environment

II. What affects my motivation?

Self-reflection

- When I was motivated, I: Felt...? Thought...? Did...?
- When my motivation waned, I: Felt...? Thought...? Did...?
- Why did my motivation wane? How did I restore my motivation?

III. Some challenges to motivation at graduate school

According to graduate students, motivation wanes over time and the following contribute to poor motivation:

- Knowledge-based issues
 - not understanding the information and/or having skills deficiencies
 - not feeling or being competent
- Structural issues
 - length of the project lack of structure increasing responsibility
- Supervisor Relationship issues
 - mismatch in communication and working styles inability to form a collaborative relationship
- Self-Regulation issues
 - doing the thesis for external reasons: e.g. better career, grad school by default: no jobs right now, everyone's doing it, family pressure, fell into this subject area habitual procrastination
 - weak time management skills being distracted by 'little projects'
- Social/Personal issues
 - isolation (especially for PhDs in later stages of dissertation writing) and feeling like the "only one"
 - lack of trust in self; fears, anxieties, and worries unbalanced work/personal life
 - feeling overwhelmed by the project or pacing or degree or supervisor

IV. Strategies

Motivational strategies in this module have been organized into the following themes:

1. Am I maximizing my intrinsic sources of motivation?
2. Do my values fit my goals and actions?
3. Do I feel a sense of control?
4. Do I have balance and connection to self and others?
5. How can I maintain my drive and energy?

1. Am I maximizing my intrinsic motivation ?

The more intrinsic interest you have, the better.

Find a reading or research question that you enjoy thinking and wondering about.

Ask yourself:

- Do you allow yourself time in the day to “just think”?
- Do you enjoy reading research papers on your topic?
- Do you get excited by new research findings?
- Do you find yourself thinking about your research outside of your work time?

If the answer is no, think about ways to incorporate your intrinsic interests into your work:

- What topics or questions did you come to grad school to study?
- What new findings do you find really exciting?
- What courses do you find the most interesting?

Try a thought experiment: If you could design and work on any project, with no limits at all, what would it be?

Whether or not your dream project is realistic, it may give you a jumping off point.

2. Do my values fit my goals and actions?

Our attitudes or opinions stems from our values which, in turn, result in our actions. When our actions (e.g. chronically missing deadlines) and our values (e.g. being a responsible student) don't match, we tend to feel conflict. Unity and cohesion of values and actions is the goal.

Self-Reflection

- What are my values?
- Do my current actions reflect my values?

Think clearly & specifically about your future plans

- Where do you see yourself? Do you want a research position? A teaching position? A job with a government agency or NGO? A job in the private sector?
- Consider whether how you spend your time day to day corresponds with your goals
- Imagine where you see yourself after graduation, and structure your time to pursue that goal:
 - If you want a teaching position:
 - Attend professional development courses and workshops focusing on teaching (e.g. at the Centre for Teaching and Learning)
 - Pursue opportunities to TA and teach
 - Offer to guest lecture classes in your research area or topic of interest
 - If you want a research position:
 - Focus on lab work
 - Devote time each day for analysis/writing
 - Present your research whenever you can (within the department, at conferences)
 - If you want to work in either the private or public sectors:
 - Make contacts in the field
 - Arrange for informational interviews with people in the field
 - Attend relevant conferences
 - Investigate opportunities for volunteer positions or internships
 - Gear your research toward a practical, real world problem

Operationalize a goal into action steps or sub-goals.

To assist you, use [Values-Based Goal Setting Analysis](#).

Tool: Values-based goal-setting

My value:

Goal I want to achieve:

Steps to achieving my goal	Barriers	Strategies	Date achieved
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			

Example

My value: Being a first-class scholar

Goal I want to achieve: Publish my latest research findings in Journal X by October 31

Steps to achieving my goal	Barriers	Strategies	Date achieved
1. Set aside 2 hours each day for writing	Very tired after working in lab all day	Rest after lab shift. After 2 hours of writing, treat myself with ice cream.	15/10 17/10 18/10
2. Sent a draft to my supervisor	Sometimes my supervisor doesn't give me very concrete feedback	Ask post-doc in my lab to read over my draft. In exchange, offer to do something for her.	19/10

Source: Forsyth, J.P. & Eifert, G.H. (2007). *The Mindfulness & Acceptance Workbook for Anxiety*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

3. Can I make choices? Do I feel a sense of control?

Human agency is the capacity for human beings to make choices and to enable those choices to be acted upon or imposed on the world.

The degree to which a graduate student has agency often depends on the individual's experience and the supervisory relationship. It is common for students to swing between feeling uncomfortably independent and alternatively voicing concern that they do not have enough scope for making choices regarding their research project. An "autonomy supportive" supervisor will know how much latitude can be given to a student so that he or she can perform optimally.

PhD students are generally given a great deal of independence to design and manage their own projects while Master's students might need to work more closely within the protocols or research focus of the supervisor.



Use [“What do I control?”](#) to assess how much control you have. Doing this exercise often helps you see that you have more agency than perhaps you thought.

It is important, too, for your well-being that during times of limited agency, you have mechanisms and approaches to help you cope, relax, and accept.

See [“Learning to Accept What We Can’t Change”](#) for ideas on how to practice acceptance.

Tool: What do I control?



Activity

1. Choose one of your challenges. Using the model above, enumerate which aspects of the challenge are under your control and which aspects are externally controlled.
2. From there, prepare a plan of action to attain and maintain what you do control and a plan for managing those elements over which you have less control.
3. For elements in your life over which you have no control but still must face, acceptance of your situation will help to relieve stress.

Tool: Learning to accept what we can't change

The following are some ways to help you learn to accept what you cannot change.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is awareness, without judgment, of life as it is, of you as you are, of others as they are. It is a condition of “being” present rather than “doing”. Mindfulness is a learned skill that develops with practice.

- Sit with your eyes closed in a quiet, safe place.
- Begin with some slow, deep breaths to calm the mind and body. Pay attention to the moment (rather than the past or future)
- You may wish to focus on something like the breath, the soundscape, your body, an object, a mantra or simply watch, from a detached, non-judgmental point of view, any thoughts, feelings, moods, or sensations that arise.

Resource: Dr. John Kabat-Zinn’s wonderful book *Full Catastrophe Living* lays out his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program.

Surrender

Trying to control a problem can result in the problem controlling you.

Reach for help when it is too big for you to handle yourself. Queen’s Counselling Services provides free, confidential counselling from both learning strategists and personal counsellors.

Surrender to a higher power, whatever that means to you.

Love Your Problems

Accept the problem by telling yourself the truth about it. Describe it in detail. Unconditionally accept the problem. This is not giving into the problem, or giving up, but is a way to be with the problem and get to know it. Rather than denying the problem exists or struggling against it, “loving the problem” frees you by draining its power over you.

Celebrate Your Mistakes

Deal with fear of making mistakes by celebrating them. Get them out in the open. Examine them. Hiding them takes a lot of energy.

Mistakes teach you more than successes do. Mistakes are how we learn. Mistakes involve risk-taking which means you’re stretching the limits of your ability and growing.

Celebrating allows you to focus on correcting the problem. You’re not alone. Everyone makes mistakes.

4. Do I have balance and connection to myself and others?

The ABCs of wellbeing

A: Awareness

- How am I feeling?
- Am I suffering from ‘academic fatigue’ or burn-out?

Due to the enormous pressure during grad school, maintaining a state of well-being is critical to feeling motivated. Tiredness after many months of non-stop work, exams, meetings, etc. is normal and can usually be remedied with more rest and relaxation. Burnout, on the other hand, is more notorious. It steals your internal drive, happiness, energy, and sense of connection.

Consider speaking to a counselor or mentor if you wonder whether you’re experiencing burning out. See this [online Help Guide](#) for common symptoms of burn-out.

B: Balance

Beware of the fate of Don Quixote

In short, he so busied himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading his brain dried up and he lost his wits. —Cervantes

A chronic lack of balance in your work and personal life is all too common amongst graduate students. Many grads (and their supervisors) have a hard-driving, “workaholic” approach to their schedules, which has some benefits in terms of deliverables. However, the downsides are many: loss of connection to friends and family, isolation, low mood, exhaustion, reduced recreation and exercise, etc. Aside from the psychological need to relax and unwind, humans have a social need to connect with others so taking time to hang out, go for a coffee, etc. is TIME WELL SPENT.

Creative thinking, based on the intense research you may be doing, is most likely to happen when you allow your mind time to wander. A real gift with many positive returns.

So, are you taking good care of yourself? Consider using the [“Self-Care Check List”](#) to assess this. If you sense an unhealthy imbalance, set a few goals to invite balance back into your life.

Then, read [“Guilt-Free Play and the ‘Unschedule’”](#) before we move on to the “C” of the ABCs of Balance.

How well am I taking care of myself?

Rate yourself: 5= Frequently 4= Occasionally 3= Rarely 2= Never 1= Didn't occur to me

Physical self-care

- Eat regularly
- Eat healthfully
- Exercise
- Get regular medical check ups
- Get medical care when needed
- Take time off when sick
- Get massages/ body treatments
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play, etc
- Take time to be sexual
- Get enough sleep
- Wear clothes I like
- Take vacations
- Make time away from phones, computers

Other:

Emotional self-care

- Spend time in the company of those I enjoy
- Stay in touch with important people in my life
- Give myself affirmations, praise
- Love myself
- Revisit favourite books, movies
- Seek out comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places
- Allow myself to cry
- Find things that make me laugh

Other:

Psychological self-care

- Make time for self-reflection
- Have my own personal counselling
- Write in a journal
- Read literature unrelated to school/work
- Try something I am not expert in or in charge of
- Notice my inner thoughts, judgements, beliefs, attitudes, feelings
- Let others know different aspects of myself
- Engage my intelligence in a new area

- Practice receiving from others
 - Be curious
 - Say 'no' to extra responsibilities when I need to
- Other:

Spiritual self-care

- Make time for reflection
 - Spend time with nature
 - Find a spiritual connection or community
 - Be open to inspiration
 - Be aware of non-material aspects of life
 - Try at times not to be the expert or in charge
 - Be open to not knowing
 - Identify what is meaningful to me
 - Meditate/pray
 - Sing
 - Have experiences of awe
 - Contribute to causes in which I believe read or listen to inspirational literature
- Other:

School/ workplace self-care

- Take a break during the day
 - Take time to chat with colleagues/ other students
 - Make quiet time to complete tasks
 - Identify exciting, rewarding projects
 - Set limits with clients, colleagues, friends
 - Arrange a comfortable work space
 - Get regular feedback from mentors, supervisors, etc
 - Negotiate my needs e.g. schoolwork, extension, deadlines, etc.
 - Have a peer support group
- Other:

Balance

- Strive for balance within my academic and work life
- Strive for balance within my WHOLE life: family, relationships, school, play, rest.

ACTION PLAN:

From the activities above, highlight five you would like to start now.

Tool: Guilt-free play and the “Unschedule”

Another common concern expressed by students is feeling guilty when you are not working. Constant, pervasive guilt means you never have time to recharge your mental and physical batteries. In his book *The Now Habit: A strategic program for overcoming procrastination and enjoying guilt-free play*, Neil Fiore, PhD, espouses the virtues of guilt-free play. In fact, he argues that not taking time to recreate and enjoy life may lead to procrastination.

Using his own form of “reverse psychology”, he invented a technique called the **Unschedule** which prioritizes life goals over work goals thus (he argues) leading to more work and less procrastination. It may seem unconventional, but it works!

Purpose: get you working again; face your fear; produce quality work, give you guilt-free time for recreation; **turn a procrastinator into a producer**

Goals

1. Get working.

Start by committing to 30 minutes of work each day. 30 minutes is enough time to solve a problem when you’re focused, but not so long that you lose focus, or can’t find the energy to start. Once you’ve done 30 minutes you can do another block of 30, or stop.

2. Prioritize recreation time.

By scheduling recreation first, the **Unschedule** avoids the common resistance we have to work. Traditional work schedules leave play unstructured. The **Unschedule** tells you to play, exercise, take a day off, not overwork each day or each week, and start small. By limiting your work to predetermined periods of 30 minutes and requiring recreational time, the **Unschedule** **subconsciously builds your desire to work more and play less.**

The method

1. Punch in-Punch Out

Get a sense of the actual time you spend on quality, productive work. Use the Punch in-Punch Out approach—write down when you start work and when you stop, accrediting yourself with actual time worked. Add up the total time you are spending over a week.

2. Now take a weekly schedule or calendar.

- a. Block off times for committed **non-work** activities (recreation, sleep, meals, etc).
- b. Now take your number of real work hours and fit them into the ‘empty’ spaces. Organize small, chunks of 30-minute blocks onto the **Unschedule**.

Continue for more “ABC’s” on Balance and Connection:

C: Connection to self and others

a) Positive Self-Talk

“Self-talk” is the private conversation we have within ourselves – which we may or may not be aware of.

A shift in your language can create powerful shifts in your thinking. Negative self-talk contributes to procrastination and lack of motivation while positive self-talk can jumpstart your work, build self-confidence, and keep you moving forward. Neil Fiore, writer of “The NOW Habit”, contrasts the language of Procrastinators and Producers. Producer language moves you forward while Procrastinator language gets you stuck.

See [“The Language of the Producer”](#) for more details.

b) Positive Visualization

Even when you are not feeling especially motivated, visualizing yourself as a motivated person can help.

See [“Visualizing My Best Self.”](#)

c) The Mind-Body Connection

In order to relax the mind, it’s important to relax the body and vice versa. Some people accomplish this through intense physical activity and others prefer calming activities.

The mindfulness approach has been used for many years in the East to increase mind stability and clarity. Taking a few moments to gently watch your breath, without forcing, can often be enough to naturally slow the breath and heart rate, and release muscle tension. Another approach is to simply watch what is going on in the mind, without judgment or criticism.

See [“Mindfulness Practices.”](#)

For a number of relaxation tips and techniques, see our online [resources on stress management](#). You might also consider joining a yoga or meditation group where you can relax with others!

d) Using Your Professional and Personal Networks

Faculty can play a key role in helping you stay motivated.

Set regular meetings with faculty involved in your learning. Have regular, ongoing email communication, even when your supervisor is not physically available.

Also see [“Develop Mentor Relationships”](#) for more suggestions on finding support in your networks.

Tool: The language of the producer

Procrastinators: get overwhelmed, feel pressured, fear failure or success, try harder, work longer, feel resentful, lose motivation, focus on what they “should” be doing, feel like they have little or no control of their circumstances

Producers: put aside fears (e.g. failure, feeling overwhelmed, low self-esteem); enjoy guilt-free play; feel in control of your life/create your own narrative; focus on what they can start now.

Self-Statements that Distinguish Procrastinators from Producers

Procrastinators say ...	Producers say ...
I have to.	I choose to.
I must finish.	When can I start?
This project is so big and important.	I can take one small step.
I must be perfect.	I can be perfectly human.
I don't have time to play.	I must make time to play.

Exercise

1. Identify any negative or counterproductive self-talk which incites procrastination or low motivation. e.g. “At this rate, I’ll never finish”; “I should have started earlier”; “There’s only more work after this”; “It’s not working”.
2. Prepare challenges to these negative statements e.g. “I’ll never finish” → “I’ll start the next step NOW.”

“Procrastinator” Statement: _____

“Producer” Statement: _____

Source: Fiore, N. (2007). *The NOW habit: A strategic program for overcoming procrastination and enjoying guilt-free play*. 2nd edition. Toronto: Penguin Group.

Tool: Visualizing my best self

Read the following statements aloud or quietly, and take time to really experience the thoughts, feelings and sensations as they arise. Allow about 10 minutes of uninterrupted time.

First: close your eyes. Take a moment to relax and focus on your even, easy breathing.

Now: think of a time when you felt confident, focused, energized and stimulated.

This can be in a school related experience or outside of school – it could be standing in front of people presenting on a topic, it can be writing a paper, it can be playing a sport, doing a paid or volunteer job, helping a friend or family member. Place yourself there.

Where are you? Notice your surroundings... Are you in a group? Alone? With a friend?

What are you doing? What did you do to prepare for this moment? Did you have someone's help to get ready? Did you rehearse what you would do? Are you speaking? If so, what does your voice sound like? Do you sound strong? Animated? Calm?

How do you look? What is your facial expression like? Are you smiling?

What are the people around you doing? How do they look? Are they listening to you? Are you working together?

What's happening in your body? Do you feel relaxed? Strong? Comfortable? Excited? Are you sitting, standing, doing something physical?

What's happening in your mind? Are you thinking? Creating? Planning? Writing? Performing? Just being? What thoughts are going through your mind?

Finally: how did you feel when you had finished what you were doing? Did you feel satisfied? Relaxed? Proud? On top of the world?

Did you reward yourself in some way for your hard work?

How to use this Motivation Tool:

When you are faced with a challenging situation or a difficult task you are avoiding, take a few moments to remember how it feels to be motivated and energized. Remember how you felt in the above scenario, before, during and after the experience. Tap into this image of your "Best Self" whenever you need to motivate yourself to face a new challenge. Imagine yourself performing the task competently. Generate an image of yourself in the situation, fill in the details and draw on this to motivate yourself to work toward this goal.

Written by: Liz Racine, Learning Strategies, Queen's University

Tool: Mindfulness Practices

Mindful Breathing

Get comfortable in a place where you'll be undisturbed for 5-10 minutes. You may sit on the floor or a chair. Sit upright with your palms up or down on your lap. Close your eyes and gently guide your attention to the natural rhythm of your breath—wherever in your chest or belly.

Simply notice the breath as you breathe in...and out...in...and out. There's no need to make the breath faster or slower, deeper or shallower. Just allow your breathing to do its own thing. Sense the air passing from chest through the nose as you breath. In and out.

Notice your breathing with a sense of kindness and gentle allowing. There's nothing to do except notice your breath. Sink into its natural rhythm: the rising and gentle falling of the chest and belly as you breathe in...and out. In and out.

If you find your mind wandering or you feel distracted, just kindly notice that, and return your attention to the rhythm of the breath and the rising and falling of the chest and belly. Continue this practice of kind observing for as long as you wish.

Mind Watching

Goal: to notice our judgmental and worry thoughts rather than getting caught up in them

Start by taking a few slow, deep breaths. Continue breathing throughout the exercise. Imagine you're in a medium-sized white room with two doors: your thoughts come in through the front door and leave out the back door. Pay close attention to each thought as it enters. Now label the thought as either a judging or a non-judgmental thought. Watch the thought until it leaves. Try not to analyze or hold on to it. Just acknowledge having the thought. If you find that you're judging yourself for having the thought, just notice that. Don't argue with your mind. Just notice it for what it is and label it: "Judging—there's judging". You'll know if you're caught in a judgment by your emotional reactions and by how long you keep each thought in the room.

Keep breathing, watching, labeling. A thought is just a thought. Observe your thoughts as if they were visitors passing through the white room. Let them have a moment on the stage and then let them leave when they're ready to go. Then greet and label the next thought...and the next.

Continue this exercise until you sense a real emotional distance from your thoughts.

N.B: Observing your thoughts without judging or reacting to them isn't easy at first, but with time and regular practice, your mind will get less and less wild.

Adapted from: Forsyth, J.P., & Eifert, G. (2007). *The mindfulness & acceptance workbook for anxiety*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.

Tool: Develop mentor relationships

Sometimes students benefit from additional mentoring and support:

- A post doc or a senior grad student
- A faculty member other than your supervisor with whom you get along with or whose research you find interesting
 - Even within a mentor model, developing relationships with several faculty gives you the opportunity to work collaboratively, learn from a broader range of knowledge and expertise, develop skills, and increase your contacts in the field

Develop these relationships with people around the department:

- Develop collaborative projects with other faculty or post-docs
- Set up weekly meetings with another grad student to discuss and keep track of each other's plans and progress and increase accountability
- Ask another student to occasionally read and edit your work before sending it to your supervisor, and offer to do the same for him or her

If you want to re-shape your program of research, discuss this with your supervisor:

- Your supervisor wants you to be happy and productive
- If you find one of your projects uninteresting or overwhelming, talk your supervisor:
 - Discuss whether you can reduce your involvement or get someone else involved
 - Suggest a new project you would be interested in working on
 - Frame the situation in terms of your strengths and enthusiasm:

E.g.: “I am really interested in the area of green energy, and I have been doing a lot of background reading on it. Also, I tend to work really well in group setting. The project I am working on doesn’t really focus on my primary interests, and leaves me feeling a bit isolated within the lab. I wonder if we can bring someone else on board to work with me on that project, and I can use the extra time to develop my ideas for the green energy project”

Get **professional support**: learning strategists, Writing Centre tutors, other faculty members inside or outside your department.

Colleagues can help you keep motivated. Find a colleague who is a role model. Ask what his/her strategies are.

Don’t forget your **family**. Explain your student life to your partner and family, and enlist their cooperation in making realistic plans or commitments.

5. How can I maintain my drive and energy?

- Is it normal for my motivation to wane and wax during my program?
- How can I keep my motivation going over a long period of time?

2 - 4 years is a long time to keep motivation high while running the grad school marathon. However, there are things you can do to build endurance and keep moving ahead.

Manage your time

1. Plan: create a macro-plan or overview of major benchmarks (doing comps, submitting proposal, publishing a paper, etc.). Make it very visual so you can see it regularly. You might like to use the Gantt project planning software. It's easy to learn and free.
2. Set and prioritize goals: set weekly, term, and program goals. Take time to prioritize, review and re-adjust your goals.
3. Organize a daily list of tasks and schedule them into your day timer or calendar.
4. Consider blocking major activities throughout the 3 parts in a day.

E.g. 3 hours in morning: read and write

3 hours in afternoon: office hours and lab time

2 hours in evening: think on the day's readings, mark assignments

Use large breaks at lunch and dinner to exercise, eat, socialize, check Facebook, etc

5. Set aside a weekly time slot to review what you have done and update the plan
6. Aim for 6 days of solid work and a full day off for re-creation (and groceries?)
7. Look for ways to focus on your priorities; delegate booking research subjects, setting up the lab, confirming room reservations to lab assistants, volunteers, etc.

Be productive EVERY workday

Even when you have low motivation, doing a small task means that you can honestly say, "I worked today". Most grad students want to feel productive and if a whole day is frittered away, it's usual to feel bad.

Monitor your accomplishments (even those very small bits of work) by writing them down. You can make lists in iCal, Google Calendar, etc. or you may simply jot down the task and how much time you spent doing the task.

Try using time monitoring software. The following two are easy, free, and fun to use.

- [My Tomatoes](#). This also helps to get you started on tasks, although eventually longer periods of work will be desirable.
- [Time Tracker](#): Basic time-tracking is free, although you can upgrade for full services.

Pace yourself

Be a turtle, not a hare!



In Aesop's fable "The Tortoise and the Hare" the steady paced turtle got to the finish line, not the sprinting rabbit. Sprinting is alright when you have a small, time-limited task or project, but racing through a 4 year PhD is madness.

We have plenty of online resources devoted to time management. Visit [our list of topics](#) and choose Time Management for tools to assist in planning, organizing, and monitoring your time.

V. Motivational plan



Congratulations for reading through the module. Now it's time for you to make your own plan to GET AND STAY MOTIVATED. Get started with "My Motivation Plan" below.

You can also check out [Zen Habits](#) for another great resource on daily motivational support.

Tool: My Motivation Plan

Here are some examples of internal and external motivational strategies. Add your own!

Internal Motivation Strategies	External Motivation Strategies
<p>I. Set dates for a short, medium and long-term goal. WHY is this goal important to me?</p> <p>Make a "public commitment" to achieve my goals- tell my friend Be aware of my ambivalence. Visualize myself as motivated.</p> <p>Use positive self-talk, affirmations and mantras.</p> <p>Be mindful and accept my situation without judging.</p> <p>Befriend my discomfort--remember that discomfort is an opportunity to learn and grow.</p>	<p>Use time management and organizational tools.</p> <p>Interview highly motivated people. Ask them their techniques and strategies.</p> <p>Develop a reward system, based on short and long term rewards.</p> <p>Work with a Learning Strategist. Seek help/advice from supervisors, faculty, colleagues.</p> <p>Seek personal counselling for emotional or personal issues.</p>

1. My **internal** sources of motivation are...

2. My **external** sources of motivation are...

VI. References and resources

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