



Motivation Myths

Elizabeth Lembo, MS, LPC

Enthusiasm, patience, and the energy of a Jack Russell terrier; despite our increasing access to convenience products, there are still many things we can't bottle and use on demand. For many, motivation can be a difficult resource to forge. For this reason, researchers, gurus, athletes, and spiritual leaders alike have attempted to assist us in increasing our access to motivation on demand. Most of us are deeply familiar with the need for motivation and the many ways we call upon it in our lives. From accomplishing professional and academic goals, to being present with loved ones after a long day, or just taking the dog on a leisurely stroll, motivation is the tide pushing us forward. And yet, the ability to summon motivation varies greatly from person to person. Ideas and practices surrounding motivation have conflicted and morphed over time, leaving several myths in their wake. This article explores some of the most common motivation myths and identifies some behaviors that studies have shown really do boost motivation.

Myth 1: Positive Vibes Only

People often attempt to find motivation by focusing on successful outcomes and avoiding thoughts of failure. Perhaps they find the possibility of failure immobilizing, draining them of all energy and motivation. Or perhaps they believe that thinking about failure will manifest failure, much like visualizing a successful outcome can help us accomplish tasks or help athletes "get in the zone." As intuitive as this may seem, some research suggests that visualizing or focusing solely on best-case scenarios is counterproductive to honing motivation.

Dr. Gabriele Oettingen is a professor of psychology at New York University and author of *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation*.¹ In her book, she discusses the common practice of a "positive fantasy" (aka, focusing on best-case scenarios). Her research found that effort and motivation can be stymied by positive fantasy alone. Participant's blood pressure decreased, they began to feel accomplished without action, and they relaxed. While this is excellent for stress reduction, the research team found it didn't promote motivation, with participants completing the desired task at lower rates. Dr. Oettingen invites us to think of the positive fantasy as an important first step in gaining motivation, but not the end-all, be-all. Employing a tool called mental contrasting, Dr. Oettingen developed an acronym for the steps that she believes fuel motivation: wish, outcome, obstacle, plan (WOOP).

- **Wish:** Identify and imagine what you are attempting to accomplish.
- **Outcome:** Identify and imagine what the best possible outcome is (positive fantasy).
- **Obstacle:** Identify and imagine your internal obstacles to accomplishing the task. Dr. Oettingen suggests avoiding external obstacles that may lead to creating excuses or feelings of hopelessness.
- **Plan:** Create a plan for mastering the obstacles, following an if/then behavior formula. For example, "If I find myself distracted from work, I'll take a 10-minute break and return."

The research found that participants who used WOOP accomplished their desired tasks at greater rates than those who only envisioned the positive fantasy. The catch? The "wish" needs to be something you care about. Of course, this begs the question—how do you motivate yourself to do something you don't care about? Stay tuned, we'll cover this in our next myth. Dr. Oettingen and her team developed a free app that assists people in creating and following a mental contrasting practice, the WOOP App. You can also find more information about the science behind WOOP and practice tips at www.woopmylife.org.

Myth 2: Go Big or Go Home

When it comes to motivation, some may think the bigger the goal, the better. Large goals are great at grounding us to a north star. They can inform decisions by providing direction and can inspire hope about our futures. As with our last myth, additional considerations may increase how this vision can motivate us. For many, large goals can become immobilizing. We may debate where to start, struggle with imposter syndrome, or procrastinate due to perfectionism, especially if the goal is important to us or relates to our livelihood. For lawyers, studying for the bar exam is a universal example of a large goal that most likely created anxiety and potentially paralyzed action, especially in narrowing down large amounts of practice area content to minimal outlines.

Fortunately, there are techniques for making big tasks more manageable. One example is behavioral activation (BA), which is an important component of cognitive therapy, the leading empirical treatment for depression. The goal of BA is to help individuals experiencing lethargy create positive changes in mood via behavior change. To achieve this, BA encourages breaking large goals into smaller goals and celebrating with rewards after accomplishing them. Studying for the bar exam is a much larger undertaking than focusing on gaining mastery and building outlines one section at a time. Needing to know everything all at once creates a lot of pressure. Creating small goals from large ones can help eliminate this pressure. Stanford behavioral scientist Dr. BJ Fogg adapts this practice in his book *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything*.²

Dr. Fogg created an easy way to conceptualize this model of behavior change using the acronym B=MAP, “Behavior (B) happens when Motivation (M), Ability (A), and a Prompt (P) come together at the same moment.” Dr. Fogg defines a prompt as any reminder to engage in a behavior. The greater the undertaking, the more motivation we may need, hence breaking larger goals into smaller ones. *Tiny Habits* emulates the spirit of BA through the practice of intentionally making behavior change incremental, accessible, and easier. Fogg offers clear examples of tiny habits and how small to start: Want to read more? Begin by reading one paragraph per day. Want to start a meditation practice? Start by taking three deep breaths a day.

A successful tiny habit practice includes fitting the desired behavior into your day naturally, along with small mental celebrations to help “rewire” your brain and reinforce the new behavior. We usually celebrate accomplishing large tasks and grossly underestimate the power of rewards and celebrations for accomplishing smaller tasks. While it may initially feel unnatural or frivolous to reward even the smallest change or accomplishment, the relationship between behavior and reward is a large component of the learning process for all mammals.

Not sure what to reward yourself with? Consider the BA skill of creating a reward menu that includes things like favorite people, places, foods, and activities, and reward yourself for accomplishing small tasks. In addition to serving as a reinforcement of desired behavior change, rewards can also contribute to motivation. Larger rewards can be especially helpful when we do not have as much internal motivation for the task or goal as we may wish.

Myth 3: No Shame, No Gain

People often attempt to motivate themselves with insults ranging from self-deprecating humor to self-hatred. You might have noticed this tendency in yourself or your clients, colleagues, family, and friends. Some of us may believe this is the “best” or “only” way to spark motivation, particularly if our elders (parents, teachers, coaches, etc.) used criticism to get us motivated during our formative years. While self-criticism and shame can create behavior change in acute and often painful contexts, research suggests that it is significantly less effective than using self-compassion to boost motivation. A team of researchers found that “self-critical perfectionism” was one factor that predicted developing anxious and depressive symptoms over a two-year study.³ We know that depression and anxiety often result in decreased functioning, so it’s safe to say that perfectionism, self-criticism, and shame offer us a less sustainable strategy for motivation.

Enter Dr. Kristin Neff, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Neff has dedicated her career to researching self-compassion and describes the practice as having a “healthy attitude towards oneself.” While this concept might be foreign to many who have survived adversarial professions by “toughing it out” and reserving the compassion in our lives for our clients, research shows how crucial this practice is for both motivation and success. Dr. Neff’s website currently lists 70 research articles she and others have published about the relationship between motivation and self-compassion.⁴ Overarching themes of the literature suggest self-compassion is an essential building block of motivation. As such, we might also consider the related concept, self-efficacy.



Dr. Albert Bandura is a social cognitive psychologist who developed social learning theory and contributed substantial research on self-efficacy to the social sciences literature. According to Dr. Bandura, self-efficacy refers to “[p]eople’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce effects.”⁵ The American Psychological Association further describes self-efficacy as reflecting an individual’s “confidence in the ability to exert control over one’s own motivation, behavior, and social environment.”⁶ When we feel confident in our ability to accomplish something, we may be more likely to make it so.

What inspires confidence in you? For most people, it’s reminding themselves of their successes, their skill sets, and the times they have overcome great obstacles (not referring to themselves as a pathetic failure or non-deserving imposter). A meta-analysis of 60 studies on self-compassion and self-efficacy found that individuals with greater levels of self-compassion were more likely to have greater levels of self-efficacy.⁷ That same study suggests a large takeaway for the potential of self-compassion at work: “[B]ringing self-compassion practices or training to the workplace . . . may also indirectly foster persistence and commitment to activities and [help individuals] recover quickly from setbacks through increased self-efficacy.”⁸

In her book, *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, Dr. Neff explains that self-compassion combines three principles: self-kindness, embracing suffering as a shared human experience, and mindfulness.⁹ If you’re unsure of how or where to start with a self-compassion practice, an easy entry point is to consider how you would speak to someone you love, or a small child. Consider the kindness we extend to others as a baseline for how we can also speak to ourselves. Another option is to try the five-minute self-compassion break guided by Dr. Neff, available on her website, www.self-compassion.org. This resource offers a wide array of research, practice information, tips, and tools that support the development of self-compassion.

Reconsidering Motivation

Although many have attempted to simplify motivation into a series of “life hacks,” the truth is that it’s a complex and nuanced aspect of human will. There is no magic solution, and no amount of grit can circumvent the fact that some days you just may not feel up to the task. Sometimes, lacking motivation may be a sign that you need a break; if persistent and accompanied by depression symptoms, consider seeing a therapist or contacting COLAP at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 for a free, confidential well-being consultation.

Feeling unmotivated can also be a sign that you don’t have the support or tools you need to accomplish something, or perhaps it just isn’t something you see as worthy of your time and energy. Give yourself permission to escape your bootstraps long enough to consider whether you’d prefer to make larger changes rather than continue to yank on them without results. In the long term, it’s more effective to make changes than it is to experience a lifetime of berating yourself for struggling. Going through the process of WOOP, considering B=MAP, taking a self-compassion break, and even working with a clinician can provide you with an opportunity to reconsider your strategy and connect with the intention behind your search for motivation.

Notes

1. Oettingen, *Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation* (Current 2014).
2. Fogg, *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes that Change Everything* (Harvest 2020).
3. Tobin and Dunkley, “Self-critical perfectionism and lower mindfulness and self-compassion predict anxious and depressive symptoms over two years,” *Behav. Res. and Therapy* 136 (Jan. 2021).
4. <https://self-compassion.org>.
5. Bandura, “Self-Efficacy,” in Ramachandran, ed., *4 Encyclopedia of Human Behavior* 71 (Academic Press 1994) (reprinted in Friedman, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mental Health* (Academic Press 1998)).
6. American Psychological Association, <https://www.apa.org/pi/aids/resources/education/self-efficacy>.
7. Liao et al., “A Meta-Analysis of the Relation Between Self-Compassion and Self-Efficacy,” *12 Mindfulness* 1878 (2021), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-021-01626-4>.
8. Id.
9. Neff, *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself* (William Morrow 2011).

Elizabeth Lembo, MS, LPC is the Clinical Coordinator of the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP). COLAP is the free, confidential, and independent well-being program for the legal community of Colorado. For more information, go to www.coloradolap.org. For a confidential consultation, discussion about your stressors, or to obtain helpful resources, contact COLAP at 303-986-3345 or info@coloradolap.org.



© Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program, 2023