The myth of “motivation”

A friend of mine approached me the other day and asked me “How are you always motivated?” I had to tell her the truth, I am not always motivated. It takes effort and sometimes I am kicking and screaming inside. So her question lead me to think more about motivation. If it isn’t motivation that keeps us going, what is it?

There are three deceptive myths about exercise, good nutrition and good habits in general:

1. You have to be “inspired” to do them.
2. You should always be “motivated” to do them.
3. “Experts” are always motivated to do them.

Nope! Even for pros, there is no such thing as permanent motivation. The truth is, nobody will always be “motivated” or “inspired” — motivation comes and goes. Some days, it’s awesome — you are full of zest and mojo and ready to kick life in the booty. Other days that motivation will be totally MIA. You’ll consider wetting the bed because it feels like too much effort to crawl out to the bathroom.

But it doesn’t matter; we do not need motivation nor inspiration to have good habits. In fact, what differentiates an “expert” from an “amateur” is not motivation, but action. “Experts” find ways to get the job done, regardless of how they feel. Action before motivation!

We assume that motivation and inspiration — in other words, a particular mental state — come before action. Sometimes that’s true, but most of the time, it’s not. Action often occurs before motivation and that desired mental state.

For instance, let’s say one day you decide to go for a walk. You’re not really inspired, per se, but your brain feels fuzzy and you want some fresh air. At first, you just sort of lump along, staring at the ground. After 5 or 10 minutes, the brisk breeze starts to clear the cobwebs; you stand taller and breathe more deeply; your stride lengthens and your hips loosen up. Now you’re walking proud. You have direction. The movement is actually giving you energy. After 20-30 minutes, you finish that walk on a high. Your brain fuzz is gone, replaced by crystal-clear thoughts. Your body is energized. You feel re-engaged with life and the universe. Now you’ve found that motivated mental state.

What changed? You acted first.
The 3 “S”s

We all try to rely on motivation and inspiration to get and keep us going. But motivation and inspiration are like cats: They’re fickle in their affections, and they tend to disappear when you want them around.

You can’t depend on cats. Nor can you depend on motivation and inspiration.

Here is a formula I depend on to help me continue to move forward towards my goals and that helps keep my priorities and values in check:

The 3 Ss:

1. Structure
2. Systems
3. Scheduling

Structure

Structures are the things and environments that surround us, and the things we put in place to ensure that things get done.

For instance, we might establish a daily or weekly routine that organizes us. We might look for quick, easy, and healthy recipes for those nights we work late. We might ensure that our kitchens are full of healthy food.

Ask yourself: What needs to be around me in order to help achieve my goals?

Systems

Systems are the processes and practices we use to make things happen.

For instance, we might have an evening ritual of packing our gym clothes, or a weekend ritual of making our food for the week. In our workouts, we have a good mobility warm-up routine that prepares us to move comfortably and effectively.

Ask yourself: What needs to happen for me to be effective? What processes and practices need to be in place?

Scheduling

You don’t just wait for the morning when you feel like going to the dentist — you book an appointment.

Likewise, we don’t just wait till inspiration strikes — we book a time to hit the gym. We know that at 6 am on Monday, we should be pumping some iron or pounding out the miles on the road.

Ask yourself: How am I planning and scheduling my good habits and desired behaviors?

Suggestion

A structure that has helped me stay focused on healthy eating is keeping my kitchen stocked with healthy foods and very little to no processed foods. A system I use is the weekend food prep. I plan out 3 meals and snacks, buy the ingredients I need, and then prepare them on the weekends. I portion the meals in containers and keep them in the refrigerator and/or freezer. This is such a time saver! The schedule I have in place to keep me consistent with my workouts is an app called Training Peaks. I can log my activity on a daily basis and it adds up my mileage, hours, etc. I set up my own workouts and when I am done, I log the workout and add comments. This holds me accountable and I can geek out on the stats if I want to 😊

Guess what? The 3 S’s are just habits! “Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing.” — Football coach Vince Lombardi
Take Action

Today, and every day, think about at least one of the 3 Ss - some kind of structure, system, or scheduling and make it work in your life. How can you make “winning” a habit?

Meal Prep Snack

This is one of my go-to snacks I have been prepping every other weekend. These cookies may not look that appealing, but I think of them as St. Patty’s day cookies year round. I get the added benefit of eating a serving of veggies and a sweet treat all in one!

Spinach Banana Oatmeal Cookies

Ingredients:
2-3 cups rolled oats
1 egg
2 ripe bananas
2-3 cups packed spinach
¼ cup coconut oil, melted
¼ cup raisins OR dark chocolate chips
½ tsp vanilla
1 tsp cinnamon
½ cup vanilla protein powder (optional)

Directions:
1. Preheat oven to 350 and line a light aluminum baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat.
2. In a food processor, combine bananas, egg, spinach, vanilla and melted coconut oil. Process till spinach leaves are finely chopped and the mixture looks bright green.
3. In a mixing bowl, stir oats, protein powder (if you are using) and cinnamon. Then add the spinach banana mixture and combine.
4. Gently fold in raisins or chocolate chips
5. Use a spoon to portion out cookie-shaped dollops onto the baking sheet.
6. Bake for 12-14 minutes, until the cookies are toasted and firm. Cool slightly, and they will firm up even more.
7. Serve with your choice of beverage and enjoy!

Recipe inspired by Kid Can Eat blog

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