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The Complexities of Motivation & Habit

“They always say time changes things. But you have to change them yourself.” -Andy Warhol

We as a culture harbor an intense fascination with change and motivation. Self-improvement books rake in 800 million dollars each year, with their audiobook counterparts contributing an additional 800 million. Motivational speakers make over one billion dollars annually, in the United States alone. So while it’s clear that people are actively seeking solutions for mindset, habits, and motivation, studies show that around 80 percent of our attempted habit changes fail to materialize long-term. Why is it so hard to motivate our own brains? What external and personal factors contribute to forward momentum? And, most importantly, what can we as individuals do to increase personal drive and overcome obstacles to change?

If you want to take the information in this course seriously and make meaningful changes to your lifestyle to improve mental health then chances are you’re going to have to develop some new habits. In this section we’re going to explore how to make these habits stick around for the long term.

What is motivation? It’s a surprisingly slippery definition to pin down. Normally, motivation might be referred to as the *willingness or desire to do*. If that sounds vague or broad, it’s because the ways that motivation expresses itself are varied and, to an extent, unique to each individual. What they all have in common is a change-based goal, although these desired end goals can come from different levels of the needs pyramid. We might say someone can be motivated to find food in order to not starve. Or to exercise regularly in order to, hopefully, live a longer healthier life. That same person can be motivated to get outside to improve their overall mood. The motivating factor could simply be the fun and

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enjoyment of the activity itself. So how does motivation actually work, and what does it look like inside the brain?

This is the amygdala, a part of the brain's limbic system. It plays a role in your brain's processing of fear, emotions, awareness and yes, motivation. Essentially, this tiny substation takes in information and sends it to the prefrontal cortex to trigger responses, both emotional and cognitive. This whole limbic pathway in your brain also doles out rewards in the form of dopamine, which is foundationally important to our understanding of motivation.

Dopamine is linked with pleasure, but more and more studies are showing that to be a fundamental simplification of its role in the brain. Through recent studies, we can see that dopamine is released even before you complete a task, in order to encourage you to continue something pleasurable or to take action to avoid something threatening. In this way, the brain doles out carrots of support in the form of dopamine, creating sensations of motivation and reward. And we can observe a measurable discrepancy between dopamine levels in high achievers and not-so-high achievers. Dopamine even changes the ways your brain remembers these rewarding moments by bolstering synapses within the hippocampus. All of this exists as an intricate system developed over millennia to protect and motivate you toward action.

And as you repeat actions enough times, your brain develops neural pathways, which build into habit loops. That jolt of dopamine, repeated over and over enough times leads into routine, which leads into a fully formed habits. Research suggests that this can take anywhere from 18 to 254 days to solidify, depending on the habit, but anything from drinking a glass of water in the morning, to brushing your teeth at night, to a daily run, can be hardwired into your brain, to the point where it's second nature.

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But this understanding can create an unfortunate paradox for those with mental health concerns. Depression, for instance, is correlated with reduced levels of dopamine and reduced levels of motivation. Unfortunately, this can lead to a debilitating cycle, wherein a patient with depression lacks the motivation to do the very things that can improve symptoms--think exercise, preparation of healthy meals, or intentional nighttime routine before bed.

This is not to say, however, that forming habits is impossible for those with depression or anxiety. That's hardly the case. On the contrary, habits form the basis of lasting change, so it's imperative to approach the process of creating them with purpose. This starts with understanding the practical steps inherent to the process.

It's helpful to understand the habit loop in three parts: cue, routine and reward. But for our purposes, let's start with the routine, because that's, functionally, the action you want to change or institute. Say you want to be more physically active. Or, to be more specific, you want to take a trail walk every day after lunch. That's your routine, or right now, prospective routine. The reward here may be the natural endorphins you receive from the walk, or the mood boost from the sunlight hitting your face. It might be the meaningful introspection of that time alone, or the feeling of accomplishment. It might just be the relief of getting away from your computer screen for a few minutes. The important thing is that there *is* a reward, because, as we've seen the brain's motivation is built upon it. Then we circle back to the cue, which here would be a *time cue*, of finishing lunch. And the consistency of repeating this cue-routine-reward cycle is what creates the long-lasting habit. You've probably done this--connecting cues to routine--thousands of times without even noticing it. Think about how you reach for your seatbelt as soon as you enter your car. You don't even think about it, you just automatically are in the habit of it.

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Now even understanding this, it can be difficult to create the motivation to act in the first place, let alone develop the habit consistently. So it pays to examine your own routines and think about what changes you can start making in the next days and weeks.

Start small. Remember that wide range of how long it takes to solidify a habit loop? Well, naturally, smaller more incremental changes settle in faster than larger ones. Makes sense, right? And the habit loop is going to work better if you can make the goal seem more attainable and in sight. You might not be able to--or even want to -- complete a triathlon, sure. But if you've got a bike, what can you do? And if you've got a goal, try "incrementalizing" or chunking --breaking that down into smaller chunks and taking it bit by bit. So your goal isn't to win the triathlon or even compete in one. Your goal is: "I'm going to ride my bike today." Or maybe "I'm going to ride my bike every other day." Or even more simply and attached to routine: "Every Wednesday I'm going to ride my bike to and from work"

You see, habits don't happen overnight. It's a cliché, but a true one. By understanding the forces at work behind motivation and beginning to create habits around your lifestyle, diet, sleep, and activity levels, you can start living within a context built for better, more enjoyable mental fitness.