

Staying Motivated During COVID-19: Four Promising Practices

Right now, most of us are facing a combination of less structure, increased stress, less contact with others, and a new grading system. This can lead to significant changes in motivation. Here are four evidence-based approaches to dealing with this “new normal.”

1. **Go beyond grades as motivators.** Dig deeper into core values and future goals.
 - a. What do I want for my future? What are my signature strengths (bravery, commitment, curiosity, etc.)? Find your signature strengths on the list from the VIA Institute on Character: <https://www.viacharacter.org/character-strengths>
 - b. What interests me about the courses I’m taking this semester? What about these courses is preparing me for future courses or academic goals?
 - c. Will these courses develop my professional skills? How is this helping me become a better thinker or researcher? What courses are giving me skills and knowledge that could help benefit others?
2. **Create more structure than usual and set small, manageable goals.** Remember, right now is generally not a time of peak productivity for most of us.
 - a. Start every day with a plan and at least some form of a schedule.
 - b. Break large projects down into small, manageable tasks. Each day, structure at least a few small tasks that you can cross off your to-do list to give you a sense of completion and accomplishment.
 - c. Make use of timers to signal the end of a work period, a lunch break, or a transition between work and relaxation.
 - d. When working on your own, you can structure your time to fit when and how you do your best work, but try to set a “floor” and a “ceiling” each weekday (e.g., I will get up no later than 9 am and will stop doing work no later than 10 pm)
3. **Create deliberate connection.**
 - a. It now takes deliberate effort to schedule time with study partners and friends. There is typically no incidental socializing anymore, and the lack of social stimulation creates a gargantuan loss of motivation for many people.

- b. If you miss the ambient sound of a social environment, experiment with ambient noise sites, e.g., <https://coffitivity.com/>, <https://www.noisli.com/>
- c. *Work connections*: Connect with classmates and friends who can be accountability partners and set up virtual study sessions, if that is helpful. Get a group of friends together on Zoom, with one person in charge of a timer. Time management systems typically use the “sprint and recover” method of working, where groups alternate 25, 45, or 60 minutes working, and then 5-10 minutes chatting.
- d. *Social connections*: You can schedule virtual get-togethers with your friends (e.g., watch movies, game, or have a virtual book group) if that gives you something to look forward to. It’s also okay if you have Zoom fatigue and want to do something, *anything*, else, like phone calls or letter-writing.

4. Put rewards at the end of work, not before.

- a. Even if things are really hard right now, some activities may still feel rewarding. What are your rewards? Catching up with friends, watching TV, exercising, reading, or another relaxing hobby? Schedule time to do these things **after** you have completed 60-90 minutes of class or work.
- b. Rewards feel more enjoyable if they come after a period of effort. They help us get motivated to do the effortful activity since it is tied to a reinforcing reward at the end.
- c. This cycle does not work in the reverse direction; doing the rewarding activity first (“I’ll just check social media before I start studying”) does not result in greater motivation.

Some material adapted from Northwestern University and Rice University:

<https://graduate.rice.edu/news/six-strategies-staying-motivated-during-covid-19-pandemic>

https://www.northwestern.edu/academic-support-learning/academic-strategies/staying-motivated-during-covid_19.pdf

For more resources on balancing your schedule, contact:

Community Wellness at MIT Medical

wellness@med.mit.edu

Subject: Student Wellness Consultation