

Boost Motivation

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Contact DrJ@DrLynnJohnson.com; Tel: (801) 261-1412

We hear that visualizing our goals as if they were accomplished raises motivation. That is actually not quite true.

In a large study by Oettinger and Davis (2002) found that people who expected that achieving goals would be difficult but quite possible were much more successful than those who tend to imagine their goals as already achieved. In several different areas (forming romantic relationships, taking a test, undergoing hip replacement, and getting a good job), those who set goals *and* thought it would be hard to reach the goal were more successful.

Oettinger (Oettinger et al, 2001) created a simple exercise, Mental Contrasting, to help people raise their motivation by (1) setting an attractive goal, and (2) imagining the future challenges that would interfere.

I've used this with clients and had some very solid results. I do it with myself, to get books written, keep up my exercise plan, maintain a healthy weight . . . it is just a solid, positive little exercise.

FIRST, write down your goal. Rate how desirable the goal seems, from 0 – 10, with zero meaning it has no appeal to you at all. Now write about how that goal would be great to achieve. How would it help? How would it benefit you? How might it benefit other people? Expand on all the positive aspects of the goals

(One way I have done this is to write a Future Diary, an essay, like a diary entry. I write it as if I have already accomplished the goal, and I put into that all the benefits I have experienced, as if it were already a “done deal.” Oettinger might criticize that as being too much like fantasy, but wait, I have an answer for that!)

SECOND, write down all possible interferences, all the problems that might distract you, all the ways you might forget to accomplish the goal you have set. This is *applied negative thinking*, you might call it, and Oettinger found that those who actually did that were more persistent and tenacious when the going got tough. Those people were much more likely to get that romance going, do well on the test, rehabilitate themselves after hip surgery, and two years after graduation, the *applied negative thinking* people had more jobs, better jobs and had achieved more raises.

(My version is to write about the problems that might interfere *as if they were in the past* and then describe how I handled each and every one of those problems. I talk about how I learned, got stronger, became more determined, and overcame each obstacle. I don't know my way is better, but I enjoy it and you can try it both ways and see what helps you.)

So incorporate this *contrasting* exercise into your goal setting. Write all the good things about the goal. Don't just assume the goal is good. Make a comprehensive list of *why* the goal will be worthwhile. Then, contrast that with an awareness, an appreciation if you will, of the obstacles you will encounter. Now, rate the attractiveness of the goal again, 0 – 10. Did your rating come up? Usually it does. Remember, tormentors are mentors, and we learn and grow from facing and overcoming them.

Oettinger, G.; Mayer, D. (2002) The motivating function of thinking about the future: Expectations versus fantasies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(5), 1198-1212.

Oettinger G, Pak, H, & Schnetter K. (2001) Self-regulation of goal setting: turning free fantasies about the future into binding goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(5):736-5.