

CULTIVATING A MOTIVATED MIND

Learn when to push on and when to let go to reach (and surpass) every goal you set.

BY DELFINA URE

• **EACH CHOICE** we make ideally leads us closer toward our goals. And with each step, we hope to learn from previous efforts so that the journey becomes easier along the way. But as we all know, external factors and our own minds can sometimes make that tricky to do. We asked three experts in sports psychology and exercise training for their top tips on staying motivated to achieve success. Here's how they advise making your mind your best friend when the going gets tough.

DO IT FOR LOVE

► Confidence and the right mindset can mean *everything* in reaching goals. "If two athletes of equal physical strength are put to a task, the one with the stronger drive will excel more," says human-performance expert Paul Vincent, M.S., of Altus Health. Start by examining your motivators. Clinical sports psychologist Keith A. Kaufman, Ph.D., explains that there are two types: intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic gets you interested in a challenge for the love of it. External motivators involve doing something for additional purposes

(money, praise, etc.). Aim for intrinsic motivators to push you forward so you're not propelling yourself with thoughts like "I should do this" or "I have to." Because, ultimately, the more intrinsic, and personal, your reasons, the better you'll stick with it.

THE PAIN: Take a motivational inventory. You may be surprised by what's driving you. Doing this may help save you from skipping out on commitments down the line.

THE GAIN: You can't always avoid being motivated by external things, but you can delve deeper to find what's really driving you. Vincent says if you set out to be "your best"

rather than "the best," you will be more satisfied with your efforts as you achieve the results you want.

FORGIVE YOURSELF

► If you're like us, you want to be at your best 24/7. But that "always on" quality is bound to fluctuate, and learning to embrace this dance without judgment can help you grow. Yet perfectionism isn't all bad, Kaufman says: Your dedication helps you set expansive goals and energize you to go after them. The trick is to adapt your thinking to roll with down days,

forgive mistakes, and avoid sabotaging mental strength. “The best athletes are on a trajectory to be better,” he says, rather than always expecting to perform perfectly. It’s about effort and growth. Plus, “constantly judging your experience gets in the way of performance,” Kaufman adds.

THE PAIN: Mental, emotional, and physical stress are the driving forces behind burnout. Sometimes it’s necessary to back off in order to “get back into it.”

THE GAIN: Channel your inner beginner. Whether it’s a workout or a business plan, remember what it was like to embark on your first experience, then wield that fresh motivation to go beyond any pain you feel.

KNOW WHEN TO PUSH

► It’s easy to commit to the routine you’re used to, but growth and gains are made

from consistently upping your game. According to the Flow Genome Project (flowgenomeproject.com), a performance think tank, your brain switches into “flow mode” when you’re 4% over your edge. Vincent says, “When your brain senses you’re in excess danger, it flips into the amygdala’s operating system” of fight or flight. The rigid part of your brain says, “Stay unchallenged and comfy,” while flow says, “Teach me something new and watch me master it.” What mode do you live in? The moment your brain realizes “we’re doing this,” your body will meet you halfway, releasing adrenaline, cortisol, and dopamine to support the new effort.

By contrast, emotional and mental challenges are all part of conquering new goals. Your task is to acknowledge the experience of guilt or cravings and let it pass before it triggers a slew of negative emotions. If your mind spirals into self-defeating self-talk, reiterate that you’re in charge of your choices. As for

cravings: You are genetically programmed to want to eat high-energy foods, like carbs and fats, and not to want to work out, so acting against this is hard. But like any challenge, your body will adapt to a new mindset or habit, and before you know it, that’ll be the new norm.

THE PAIN: You may lose steam sometimes because the brain is adaptive and will integrate your new routine, taking away the edge it once gave you.

THE GAIN: Vincent suggests, “Create a sense of urgency to push your brain past your edge.” Can you speed up your routine by 15 minutes? Or if you’re a business owner, set a deadline that pushes you into a healthy stress mode.

BE SEXY AND SINGLE-TASK

► Peak-performance experts find that simplicity is key for entering that elusive “one with

everything” state of flow. Practice minimizing distractions so you’re not sidetracked by interruptions. A recent study shows that a three-second distraction can double the mistakes you make; a four-second distraction can quadruple them. To avoid this, learn to single-task your day. “Total concentration brings the full power of your attention to what you’re doing and helps you perform better,” Kaufman explains.

THE PAIN: Training your mind to be present is as important as building physical strength.

THE GAIN: Save your selfie for after your workout, and learn to simplify your mental processing so all your energy pours into your body’s physical exertion.

BE ACCOUNTABLE AND REWARD YOURSELF

► Do you have someone you respect who can hold you to your goals? According to motivation expert Kristen Dieffenbach, Ph.D., executive board member of the Association for Applied Sport Psychology, a sense of accountability creates healthy stress to power up your motivation. Plus, “focusing on small achievements and accomplishments helps support the anticipation and capitalizes on dopamine pathways,” Dieffenbach says.

THE PAIN: Self-assessment may be tough on the ego, but it’s a sure way to stay accountable and cut out self-defeating habits that can halt progress.

THE GAIN: Make time to celebrate your small milestones and your efforts rather than focusing only on the results.

