

# Maintaining Motivation



Many students have difficulties maintaining motivation at some point during their course. Lowered motivation affects self-directed learning, a major component of tertiary studies. Loss of interest in study may signal that one's life is out of balance. Fluctuating levels of motivation may reflect stress, lowered physical well being or illness, personal issues such as relationship problems, course dissatisfaction, or effects of studying with a disability. Addressing these issues may restore zest for living and for study.

## RE-ENERGISE!

Motivation requires mental energy. Make sure you have adequate "brain fuel" by paying attention to proper nutrition. This is especially important when you are studying long hours. Avoid the tendency to skip meals at busy times and keep a supply of high-energy health bars – they are light to carry and can be eaten while you are "on the go".

Loss of motivation may indicate that you need to recharge your mental batteries. Check that you are getting enough sleep; allow yourself time out to relax and unwind. Mental blocks can often be overcome after a good night's sleep. And regular exercise keeps you alert and 'fine-tuned' to work out solutions to study problems.

## PROBLEM SOLVE!

Identify sources of stress and deal with them. RMIT provides support services to assist with a range of concerns such as finance, accommodation and personal issues. Solving these life problems can be a great boost to motivation. Information points such as The Hub and Student Union can help you access appropriate services.

## REFOCUS ON GOALS!

So you made the wrong course choices, the subjects seem irrelevant, the teaching staff boring. How to maintain motivation?

Remind yourself of your goals: where do you want to get to? How can you get there from here? It helps to draw up a map of the steps you need to take to reach your study goal and to identify hurdles to be overcome.

In most instances, completing present subjects places you in a stronger position to transfer. Use positive self talk to get you over these hurdles and remind yourself that you are heading towards your goal.

## IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES:

**Be kind to yourself**

**Be realistic – don't demand 100% performance regardless**

**Recognise and listen to your individual needs rather than taking others' performance as a standard**

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## LIFE EVENTS AND MOTIVATION

While maintaining motivation is a common concern of students, it can be especially important for people who are also coping with significant emotional issues. Anxiety, depressed mood and grief can be normal reactions to current life events such as break-up of relationships, separation from family, loss of loved ones or adjustment to a different culture. In these emotional states, motivation is often decreased together with levels of energy, concentration and cognitive efficiency (e.g. memory, organisation skills).

These normal responses to difficult or unpleasant situations make it difficult to maintain focus on studies. However, when these states are short term, it helps to accept a temporary reduction in motivation. Your priorities may need to be reordered while you redirect time and emotional energy to dealing with life issues, and where possible to focus on less demanding study tasks. Reassure yourself that your interest and motivation for study will increase when life returns to normal. When emotions such as anxiety and grief persist, it becomes important to give priority to dealing with underlying significant issues. Counselling can assist in overcoming emotional blocks and getting back on track.

## MAINTAINING MOTIVATION WHILE STUDYING WITH A DISABILITY

Students with disabilities are often highly motivated to undertake higher education despite challenges in many areas of life that may limit time and energy available for study. While higher education provides many opportunities for development of vocational and life skills and self esteem, students with disabilities often face additional challenges in maintaining motivation. If you are a student with a disability, then understanding the effects of your disability on motivation will empower you to complete your course successfully.

Successful students are knowledgeable about their disability and creative in compensating for it. They take control of their lives, are goal oriented and persistent and select environments that suit their abilities and disabilities. If you are a student with a disability, then working on recognising your disability, accepting it, understanding it and its implications will help you cope with study. Your self esteem will be enhanced by knowledge about your disability (awareness); understanding personal strengths and weaknesses (assessment) and knowing what compensatory strategies and techniques help (accommodation) and knowing about and using support services.

## MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

Some mental health disorders are associated with fluctuating motivation as a direct effect of the disorder or of medication or other substance use. At low points, it can take significantly more effort to perform some learning tasks and certain tasks may not be achievable at these times. The key to maintaining motivation lies in being empowered to reinterpret and respond to these fluctuations in a productive and positive way.

### Some useful strategies:

**Recognition:** understanding your individual pattern of fluctuations (e.g. may be cyclical). Keeping a diary may help  
**Prediction:** anticipating when down times are likely to occur helps you to feel more in control and prepared to deal with these times.

**Preparation:** organise your study plan to schedule less cognitively demanding routine tasks and time out from study during the down times.

**Acknowledgement:** "yes, here is my down time as I predicted!"

**Implementation:** of study plan

**Positive self talk:** "I predicted this time and am in control of it. I'm prepared with constructive things to do. I know it will pass and I will get back on track and deal with the other tasks in turn"

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## LEARNING DISABILITIES

For some students with specific learning disabilities, fluctuating motivation may reflect task demands that challenge areas of difficulty (e.g. language or maths skills). In addition, negative school experiences can undermine confidence and create a pattern of avoiding failure by giving up first.

### Some useful strategies:

**Recognition:** understanding one's individual pattern of specific learning disability and its impact on different study tasks; feedback on psychological test profile and its implications

**Acknowledgement:** "yes, like many famous and successful people (e.g. Einstein!) I have a specific learning disability. Understanding this explains why I had difficulties at school. Now I'm empowered to maximise my achievements at uni"

**Prediction:** anticipating which specific learning tasks are going to be most challenging and being prepared

**Remediation:** for specific disabilities (e.g. language, maths programs)

**Compensation:** alternative strategies in other input/output modes

**Positive self talk:** "Unlike most students in my course, I'm undertaking a double degree (diploma etc.). not only am I studying Arts (Science, IT etc.) but I'm also learning skills in overcoming my specific disability. This can seem overwhelming at times. But in the end I will be a super-talented graduate!"

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service, the RMIT Disability Liaison Unit and the Study and Learning Centre.

### City Campus

Building 43  
54 Cardigan Street  
9925 4365

### Tivoli (Bourke St)

Building 108  
Level 4  
9925 4365

### Brunswick

Building 514  
Level 2  
9925 4365

### Bundoora

Building 202  
Level 3  
9925 4365

You can also find further information and resources to assist you in your studies on our website at [www.rmit.edu.au/counselling](http://www.rmit.edu.au/counselling)

*This information sheet is a collaborative RMIT Student Services Group project by Stephanie Smyrnios (Counselling Service); Martin Fathers & Tom Cloverdale (Disability Liaison Unit) and Antoinette Poulton (Study and Learning Centre). October 2002*

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