Maintaining Motivation

Many students have difficulties maintaining motivation at some point during their program. 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, program dissatisfaction, or effect 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.

Re-focus on goals!

So you made the wrong program choice, the courses 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 goals and to identify hurdles to be overcome.

In most instances, completing present courses 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 other’s performance as a standard

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 the states are short term, it helps to accept a temporary reduction in motivation. Your priorities may need to be re-ordered 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 the 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. Understanding effects of disability on motivation empowers these students to complete their programs 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. These students recognize their disability, accept it, understand it and its implications, and take appropriate action by continually dealing with strengths and weaknesses and making adjustments. Their self-esteem is enhanced by knowledge about the disability (awareness); understanding personal strengths and weaknesses (assessment); knowing what compensatory strategies and techniques help (accommodation); and knowing about and using support services.

Some mental health disorders are associated with fluctuating motivation as the 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 the fluctuations in a productive, positive way.

**Useful strategies:**

**Recognition** - understanding your individual pattern of fluctuations (e.g., maybe cyclical); keeping a diary may help;

**Prediction** - anticipating when downtimes are likely to occur helps you to feel more in control and prepared to deal with these times;

**Preparation** - in up times, organise study plan to schedule less cognitively demanding routine tasks and time out from study for the down time;

**Acknowledgement** - "yes, here is by downtime as I predicted!"

**Implementation** - of study plan;

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

For some students with specific learning disabilities, fluctuating motivation may reflect tasks 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.

**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;

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

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

**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 am 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 these areas and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 Monday through Friday, between 9am and 5pm.

*This information sheet is a collaborative RMIT student services group project by the Counselling Service, the Disability Liaison Unit and the Study and Learning Centre.*