16. Effort Activity: The Power of If … Then Thinking

Professor Peter Gollwitzer of New York University says that many people who want to put their efforts into achieving great things, but don't, are derailed by seemingly small problems like these:

» They want to finish a task to a high standard, but a phone call disrupts them.

» They want to complete a coursework piece, but the weekend is just too busy.

» They want to do some serious revision, but some friends disturb them and the work is abandoned.

In their book *The Psychology of Action* (1996), Peter Gollwitzer and John Bargh argue that if this happens to you, it's because you have low 'implementation intention' – you *sort of* want to put in the effort, but you will be easily put off if one thing goes wrong.

The solution? Successful students anticipate these problems and plan for how they will respond to them with maximum effort. You sequence actions that anticipate obstacles and build in pre-prepared solutions – you effectively beat self-sabotage before it even happens.

Consider these examples:

Student 1: 'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning.' This is a really common internal dialogue you might experience as a student – lots do it! And with one small disruption the whole plan comes to a standstill.

Student 2: 'I'll get started on this first thing in the morning. And …

» *If* I wake up late by accident, *then* I'll use my morning break to start it instead and …'

» *If* I feel really demotivated, *then* I'll get two coffees from the canteen and drink them quickly to give me a boost and …'

» *If* I get disturbed by friends, *then* I'll make an excuse and go to the library and …'

» *If* the internet is down, *then* I'll start by using my class notes and save the research work until later.'

It's easy to see which student might be the one most likely to succeed. Student 2 has listed a series of potential problems and has recognised their tendency to self-sabotage when small things go wrong. By planning a change in action when those small obstacles come along, they are much more likely to keep pushing forward.

List all the usual blockers you use to prevent high levels of effort and for each one commit to a solution. Think them all through in your head and make notes. What you are doing is strengthening your implementation intention. You *will* put the effort in, even if small things crop up to stop you.

Use the table opposite to plan your response to self-sabotage:

If …	Then …
....	....
If …	Then … ....
If …	Then … ....
If …	Then … ....
If …	Then … ....

Final Thoughts

If … then planning often starts quite deliberately, with students using a grid like the one above to record their intentions. This keeps them firmly in mind when obstacles come.

But after a little while, you'll become good at internalising this kind of planning. You won't have to write it all down – you'll start doing it more instinctively. That's a great place to be.