How To Be Productive

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What I'm going to do here is throw a large number of different ideas at you in the hope that some will stick. I hope that you can forgive my lack of a central thesis. The closest thing I can find is that you should treat "being productive" as a skill that you invest time in, that you think about and work on. You need to try new things, and see how those ideas work for you. The things that have worked for others won't necessarily work for you - that's why I'm giving you the information like this.

Activity: I don't want this to just be me lecturing, please stop me and ask questions. Think of ways that this can apply to yourself. Let me know if you have lost track of what I was saying. I really want this to be useful. Does everyone understand our goal?

Activity: Before I tell you my ideas I want to hear yours. How do you try to be productive?

Be around people who encourage and inspire you to do more

It is my belief that the biggest effect that is most likely to cause long and lasting change is to surround yourself with people who encourage and inspire you to do more. You want to make the answer to "*I want to do X*" be the same as the answer to "*the people who are important to me think I should do X*" [Webb]. I know that it's not easy to do, but it is worth it.

"We are social beings and other people are often the catalysts or the downright driving forces behind our finest moments... ...Interacting with as many people, places, habits, and resources as possible that have a social norm that oozes a high standard of quality, performance, effort, whatever the variable, will work its way into your norms." [MacLeod]

I don't just mean people that share your goals, but that is important, I mean people who bring out the best in you. Maybe they are the ones who know how to relax, or to network, or the people who keep you happy and playful. They are just as useful as the ones who directly help you work on your goals.

Activity: How can you do this, how can you match up how you want to behave with how the people who are important to you expect you to behave?

I moved to London to be near my the people who were doing what I aspired to be doing, not in terms of a particular job but in terms of their approach to life.

Know Your Priorities

Activity: How do you prioritise?

Here is how I do it.

Step 1. Each year I pick 2 general areas to work on from each of these bullet points (18 areas in total):

- Intellectual (books, subjects)
- Health (diet, exercise, sleep)
- Emotions (feel more/less of, more control)
- Career (is the career path you are on leading you to a place you want to be)
- Financial (are you happy with how much you spend, save, earn)
- Social (people to spend more/less time around, what kind of people do you want to meet)
- Fun (what do you want to do)
- Personal (what character traits do you want to change)
- Philanthropic (how do you want to help others, or help the world)

Step 2. Each month I pick 3 or 4 goals to work on, these are mostly taken from my yearly goals. e.g. "spend more time with the people who are important to me".

Step 3. Each week I pick about 10 individual tasks that I think will help me towards my monthly goals e.g. "write an email to X".

I also use workflowy (https://workflowy.com/invite/2582ec91.lnx) to list all the goals that I could work on, this helps me decide on my 10 tasks for the week. I try to ignore the big list and focus only on the weekly tasks. For some reason this really helps me. I think it is because I'm don't have the mental baggage of having to carry all those extra ideas around.

Link your goal to a cue and to the outcomes

Make sure there is a strong mental link between [Steel, Gollwitzer, Duhigg]:
1. your obstacles and the desired outcome.
2. a cue for when you should do the task and the task itself.

The method that is probably best supported by research is MCII - Mental Contrasting and Implementation Intentions [Gollwitzer]. An alternative method is given by Alex Vermeer as a flowchart (available here: http://alexvermeer.com/getmotivated/) and directly comes from the work of [Steel].

Mental Contrasting "Imagine the attainment of the desired future and reflect on the present reality that stands in the way of obtaining it." In other words repeatedly as yourself "why do it" and "what obstacles do I face".

Implementation Intentions "Whenever situation x arises, I will initiate the goal-directed response y!". In other words, turn your goal in the following format "If/when _____ happens then I will do _____".

Here are my set of steps to carry out MCII; just ask yourself each question in turn:

1. Vividly imagine your best (realistic) hopes that achieving this goal will lead to.
2. Contrast with the reality of things that stand in your way.
3. Repeat the above two steps one more time.
4. Work out a trigger/cue for when to do the task; make it vivid, concrete and simple.
5. Work out what the first step is, make sure it doesn't involve any decisions.
6. Do the last two steps for the task itself as well as a couple of obstacles that you identified in the first two steps (avoid and overcome the obstacles).

Believe in yourself

It is trite but true. You are unlikely to do anything on your goals if you don't genuinely believe that you can succeed. "self-efficacy was found to be positively and strongly related to work-related performance" [Stajkovic]. Hence, there is no point in setting a goal if you don't think it is likely lead to anything positive (see [Steel]).

I have found mental contrasting to be a good method to help me believe that working on a task will lead to things that I want to happen. Another useful method is re-framing the goal to become outcome independent by making the goal to "learn a valuable skill".

Practice Deliberately and Play Playfully

When you want to get better at something split your time between play and practice. You want to adopt a mindset of getting better (see [Dweck]).

Deliberate Practice [Ericsson]
- Practice is not the repetition of things you can do easily, it must be something you have previously found difficult or haven't done before.
- Have a clear specific goal of what you want to improve upon.
- After you have done the task, review and think about how you did relative to your goal. i.e. take time for getting and assimilating feedback.
    - Make sure you are aware of how you are doing relative to your task, and how that changes the direction you want to move in. [Hattie]
        - Where am I going
        - How am I doing
        - Where to next

● Making and learning from errors is a necessary step on the path to eventual success.
Playful Play [Bateson]

● "Playful behaviour and playful thought can generate radically new approaches to challenges set by the physical and social environment"
● Play is the antithesis of "work" or "serious" behavior.
● The behaviour is rewarding to the individual (intrinsic motivation)
● Its performance is a goal in itself
● Performed in a protected context (no fear of failure, "doing it wrong", or dangers)
● Performed repeatedly
● With a positive affect (be happy!)

Clear away distractions [Steel]

Finally, make a list of the things that you spend a lot of time doing that don't help your goals. Think of ways to make them less fun, more hassle, harder to start, easier to forget, and less likely to happen. I have deliberately put this as the last thing, it should be a last resort. My attempts to block facebook are always in vain if I don't have a clear goal for what I should be doing, the belief that I can do it, the knowledge of what to do and the energy to work on it. When I have all that I sometimes still find myself on facebook and in those instance I love the facebook news feed eradicator (https://github.com/jordwest/news-feed-eradicator/).

In Summary

1. Get enough sleep [Owens], the right food, and exercise.
2. Find a social norm that fits with the behaviors you want [Webb].
3. Have goals that support: autonomy, relatedness and competence [Deci].
4. Have goals that are: challenging yet feasible; valuable; and give rapid actionable feedback. [Ericsson, Hattie, Halvorson, Steel]
5. Develop a habit of sticking to tasks and not procrastinating.
6. Treat "not-procrastinating" like a skill to practice. Keep track of what is working well for you and what isn't. Try new things.

Closing

Activity: Any questions?

Feedback Questions

● What things did you like about the workshop?
● How can I make the workshop even more awesome next time?
● Is there anything you plan to do or change because of this workshop?
● What else should I have asked here (and what's your answer)?

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