

# Get It Done

# **What's in it for me? Unlock the secrets to getting things done.**

Here's a question for you: How good are you at getting things done? Are you a procrastinator? Or maybe you have trouble seeing projects through – like learning a new language, for example? Or doing your taxes? Since you picked this blink, I reckon you struggle with it just as much as I do. Because I may not have a masters degree from any university, but I would sure call myself a master procrastinator and an enthusiastic project starter and not-finisher. And so to start our common discovery of how to get better at just doing things, I want to start with a Baron Munchhausen story. If you've never heard of him, he's the protagonist in an old tale about a military man who's a master at telling lies. One of his best-known stories goes like this: One day, he's riding his horse across the countryside when all of a sudden, he finds himself stuck in a bog. And the horse starts to sink deeper and deeper by the minute. But instead of panicking, the Baron of Lies comes up with a cunning solution. He grabs his own head ponytail and pulls himself (and his horse) out of the swamp. Sure, the Baron's story defies the laws of physics, but its symbolism is clear: self-motivation is the key to moving forward. And it just so happens that it's one of the main things I need help with. And you probably need some help, too, right? Because, seriously, why does it take so much effort to start a new habit or actually finish a project. Tell me I'm not alone, and that boring life-admin tasks stay on your to-do list for months, too, because you think they will probably take hours. And then when you actually sit your butt down and do them, it's all done in an hour. Why are we like that? I'm Jasmin. I'm a producer here at Blinkist – procrastinator extraordinaire and here to help us both figure out how to get over ourselves. You and I are going to find out how to just get things done, be it tasks or simply getting out of bed. That's one thing you and I got done today – unless you're listening to this while in bed.

## **To reach the finish line, set compelling, specific goals – and have fun!**

Maybe you've also pulled yourself through a major life change before, like ending an unhealthy relationship or switching careers. All of these are things that need to get done, even when motivating yourself to do them can be tough. Demands, distractions, worries – they're all part of life. And when they kick in, your motivation (and goals) often get kicked to the curb. So how do you motivate yourself to pursue your dreams and desires when life is in full swing? It all starts with choosing the right goal. When framed correctly, goals can be powerful motivational tools. To set a goal that'll pull you to the finish line, keep these three things in mind. First, frame it as the end in itself rather than a means to another goal. For example, say your goal is "finding a job" rather than "applying for a job." You want your goals to be exciting – not a chore. Second, keep your goals abstract. Be careful not to be too vague, though. For example, "Improve my mental health" is better than "be happy" because it points you toward your next step: in this case, perhaps, starting therapy. Third, focus on "do" versus "don't" goals. That is, set goals in terms of something you wish to approach – like good health or success – rather than avoid, like sickness or failure. Goals, like recipes, tend to work best when they're quantified. Setting a target that's challenging, measurable, and actionable will

pull you toward your goal and enable you to monitor your progress. Just make sure, you're the one to set the target rather than someone else. Because that's going to help you be more committed. And try not to pick targets that are overly optimistic. We all love an optimist like Ted Lasso, but when you're too optimistic, that can lead to a bunch of fantasizing, rather than you putting in the actual work. There are two types of numerical targets you need to take into account: how much (so, for example, you want to save \$10,000) and how soon (within one year? six months? two years?). So if you had vaguely thought of something like "excelling at your new job" or "getting more sleep" as your goal, try swapping that out for: "complete a work project by the end of the week" and "get eight hours of sleep every night." If you want to start running, set a target like "run the next Chicago Marathon in under five hours." Another item you should have in your self-motivation arsenal? Incentives. A foundational element of behavioral science dating back all the way to Pavlov's salivating dogs. Incentives are basically forms of rewards and punishments. Rewards and punishments motivate action by creating immediate mini-goals to your main goal. Let's go and grab a coffee at your favorite coffee spot for this little example. How much is your latte these days, or your flat white or whatever else you like? Does your inside voice tell you: this is too much? Expensive coffees have been demonized as the reason people aren't saving enough money. Some joke that lattes and avocado toast are the reasons millennials can't buy houses, and yet: here we are buying our flat whites and lattes. You know why? Because they feel like a reward, whether it's for the sometimes arduous task of getting out of bed or for having a productive morning of work. I'm sure we can always find a good reason. To get the most out of your incentives, make sure that you end up rewarding the right action. Otherwise you might risk "the cobra effect." It's a wild story. Look it up. It involves people in India breeding cobra snakes only to then collect rewards for catching them. Clearly, that's easier said than done. To stay on track, you need to be clear on an important distinction: Does your incentive actually lead to progress toward your goal, or is it just a useless target that's easy to measure? Let's say you're trying to get promoted, for example. Then rewarding yourself for the amount of time spent at your computer is not going to help you much - but if you incentivize the quantity or quality of your work, it will. That means, you could set yourself the goal of creating one unprompted report for something that's really going to help your team in the next 3 months. Or work on pitching one good product idea every month in written form, so you can keep track. But we want to keep things exciting. And to do that, try to embrace uncertainty and hit pause on your incentives now and then. I'm just saying: take a break. Breathe. It's not a sprint. It's a marathon. Hitting pause will also help confirm that you're pursuing your goal for your goal's sake - and that you're not doing it for the incentive alone. The final, crucial ingredient to goal-setting is fun. I know. I just basically talked you through a bunch of homework you should do to get stuff done. And now I'm telling you to have fun, too? Bear with me. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain's titular character notes that "work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do." That is basically another way of defining intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when you do something just because. Because you want to. Because you have fun doing it. Because it's your dream. Because. Maybe there isn't even a proper reason. It just feels good. And so, intrinsic motivation is the best predictor of engagement in any activity. Let me unpack this real quick. What I'm saying is: When you set a goal for yourself - especially if it's one you don't necessarily think is super fun to begin with, like work or exercise or vacuuming - you need to make sure you can find some fun aspect in it. Because if you're having fun, then you're intrinsically motivated, which in turn leads to success. There are, of course, exceptions. Like, what if you've been procrastinating on breaking up your relationship? It's hard to find the fun in that. But keep in mind how it may make you feel in the long

run. Maybe you'll feel freer, maybe you'll stop hurting yourself or your partner. So, in situations where it's hard to find joy in a task, just remember why you want to do something and associate the positive outcomes with it in your mind. But generally, the strategy here is simple: make your goals fun! One way to do this is through temptation bundling. That means, you could put on your favorite show while you work out. This is most effective if you only allow yourself that little temptation while you're pursuing your goal. Another thing you can do is to try and notice any feelings of fun and joy that you already have. If you're trying to get into running in the mornings, for example, you could try and notice that short feeling of euphoria right after your run. Or that feeling of your heart and skin warming up when you've got the sun shining and the wind blowing through your hair. When your breath starts getting into a rhythm. When the world in the morning is calm and still. Breathe that in. Focus on that.

## **Maintain momentum by monitoring your progress and tackling the “middle problem.”**

It's one thing to set a goal like running a marathon or achieving inbox zero, and it's a completely different thing to see it through. You need to get from point A (couch potato or 500 unanswered emails) to point B (surviving 26.2 miles or seeing a big, fat 0 on your screen). And one of the most effective ways to stay motivated while you get from A to B is by keeping track of your progress. Tracking progress increases your motivation because it intensifies the commitment to your goal in two ways. One, it boosts your confidence in believing that you can achieve your goal. You've made it this far, right!? And two, you confirm to yourself that your goal is worth it, simply because of the sheer amount of time and effort you put in. While making progress is important, how you monitor it also matters. The question is: Should you focus on how much you've already done, or how much you still have left to do? The short answer is: both. Here's a good example: I'm sure you've gotten these little loyalty stamp cards before, where you get a free coffee, or smoothie, or slice of pizza or whatever, after you've purchased ten, right? And so, in the beginning, you probably don't care too much about that card. But then, after you've collected a few stamps, you may find yourself standing in line to buy coffee or smoothies or pizza more often. The closer you get to your free slice, the more you crave it. Our brains are funny that way. This is called the “goal gradient effect” in motivation science. It just means that the more progress you've made, the more excited you are to continue. Basically, the glass-half-full motivator. But the glass-half-empty point of view can actually help you, too. Here's another example. Imagine you're doing yoga. You're at home, on your mat. And while you're in downward dog you come eye to eye with a giant dust ball. Maybe that's the last straw. Maybe it's at this point that you realize it's actually been forever since you've last cleaned. And so, you get up and whip out the vacuum cleaner. Right. Now. In this case, your sense of falling behind ended up motivating action. Neither strategy is necessarily better or worse – but it is useful to be able to know when to implement one over the other. And so, here's a little advice from the book: if you're new to or uncertain about a commitment, try to stay motivated looking at it with a glass-half-full mindset. But if you're an expert or you already know that you've committed to a goal, it's actually the glass-half-empty mentality that may push you over the finish line. If you're new to the gym, start counting the days that you've gone. How awesome is that – maybe you've made it to the gym three times last week! But if you're a real fitness buff and you kinda fell out of your routine, think about

all the days that you've missed. Let that little taste of guilt do its thing. In any of these scenarios, tuning into how you feel will let you know how best to track your progress. When you feel good, you'll know you're progressing on your goal. And when you feel bad, you'll know you're lagging. But regardless of how you track progress, you'll notice that staying motivated is easier at the start and end of your journey. I'm an expert at this. I've started many hobbies: guitar, painting, knitting, learning a new language. At the beginning, it's all easy and fun and I'm motivated and can't stop talking about it. And a month later, it's like it never happened. The reason that's the case is that there are special, clearly marked points in time. It's when you start doing something for longer that it becomes harder to maintain that enthusiasm. This is called the "middle problem." The middle problem can be explained by the small-area principle. To stay motivated toward your goal, you'll likely compare your next action to whichever is smaller: the progress you already made or the progress that you have yet to make. In other words, at the beginning, you'll look back at what you've done. And past the midpoint, you'll look ahead at what's still missing. And every time you look, you're motivated. But when you're in the thick of it - in the middle - it seems that either way looks just as long. Whether you look back or ahead, no area looks smaller than the other. And that means there's little motivation to get the goal done, or to do it right. This may just be my biggest challenge, to be honest. So how can we avoid getting stuck? The solution is pretty simple: keep the middle short. Let's say we've got some sporty goal. It's best to have a weekly exercise goal rather than a monthly one. Or if we're talking about a huge work project with a deadline that's far away, then you could try and break it down into small weekly assignments. Here's another hack: try framing the present as a beginning or an end. That means, for example: If you think of lunch to be something that happens at the beginning of the afternoon, rather than the middle of the day, you may just eat more healthily. Finally, think about times that you've been successful and unsuccessful in achieving your past goals. Thinking about successes is kinda easy, right? But we've all messed up at one point. I know I have. I've tried, I've failed, I've tried, I've failed again. So, how about learning from those failures? If you're someone who struggles to lean into your mistakes, you're not alone - but you are missing out on a bunch of important information. Famous playwright Samuel Beckett once wrote, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." And Serena Williams, who many think is the world's best tennis player said, "I've grown most not from victories, but setbacks." They both are pointing out something really important: whatever you're trying to achieve, whatever goal you have, there is no way to guarantee your success or failure. But the one thing that is guaranteed is that you'll learn from it. As someone who's really good at failing, I can only confirm that the best way to learn from failure is to practice cultivating a growth mindset. That means: try to really internalize the fact that your abilities, your intelligence and skills, can grow and improve. That you can always get smarter through focus, dedication, and perseverance. It's proven that if you have a growth mindset, you'll increase your resilience when you face challenges or frustrations. When you master that, negative feedback will stop feeling like a personal attack. Indeed, you may start to think of it as a way to learn what you need to work on. One last strategy to stay motivated even when you're failing is this: give advice. Even if you don't think you're qualified to dole out tips regarding something you haven't mastered yet - for example, controlling your temper or saving money. But when you give advice, you're tapping into what you've learned to do (or not to do) when trying to reach your goal. And when you dish out advice, you may be reminded of just how knowledgeable you actually are.

## **Use - and help - those around you to**



# achieve personal and shared goals.

But not only could you be the one giving advice, you could also start to look for a possible role model – someone you could emulate on your way to achieving your goal. It could be anyone really – a friend, parent, teacher, or colleague. But your role model should know you exist. Why? Because a great role model is someone who doesn't only set an example; they help set expectations for you. I had this professor once who I really looked up to and they kept giving me these tasks that I didn't think I was qualified for. And when I said, "Hey, I don't think I can do this. I'll probably need your help," they said, "Jasmin, I wouldn't give you these tasks if I didn't believe you'd be able to do them and to do them well. I don't want to see you fail. But I think you can do much more." To this day, having a role model who believed in my abilities more than I did was the best motivator I could've asked for. I worked my butt off for that professor. There also are anti-role models – and they can be just as important to your success. Anti-role models basically practice behavior we definitely don't want to pick up. How many times have you heard the phrase I don't want to become like my parents. And when you have cases like these, it may motivate you to "complement" their behavior with yours, which in turn could support your goals. Physically being surrounded by others can also boost your motivation. A 1898 study found that cyclists who raced against each other were faster than those who just raced against the clock. This phenomenon – wanting to work harder when others are watching – is called "social facilitation." You could use it to your advantage, by, say, working in a public place like a café. And if you're a bit of a hermit with lots of aspirations, there's still hope. Because even a proxy for another's presence, like a picture of a loved one or (this one's a little bit creepy) of staring eyes, can help you put in the extra effort and inspire you to be your best self.

## Final summary

Here's the key message: Trying to stay motivated and make serious progress in whatever you're trying to achieve in life can sometimes feel like an impossible task. But it doesn't have to be. There's a simple fix – and it just so happens to be in your control. It all starts with changing your circumstances. Most importantly, you need to define your goals. You need to pay attention to maintaining momentum, stay focused when you've got a billion other things on your plate and get your friends and family involved. And when you make your behavior and environment work for rather than against you, your goal of getting that raise, or that strong healthy body, or that tax return form sorted, or that new language learned, will be yours in no time! And here's some more actionable advice: Try to get rid of the middle problem with the "fresh start effect." So, people tend to work harder immediately after a temporal landmark – basically a day in your calendar like a Monday, a birthday, or new year. You can use this fact to your advantage if you want to get through the dreadful middle slump. This is the trick: You can frame that present moment as a memorable fresh start. So, if you want to start working out on June 23, let that be a new kind of birthday for you. And when you do that, you'll be more motivated to keep pursuing your goals. Getting over the middle problem could be as easy as telling yourself that today marks the first day of the rest of your life.