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The Goldilocks Rule: How to Stay Motivated in Life and Work

In 1955, Disneyland had just opened in Anaheim, California, when a ten-year-old boy walked in and asked for a job. Labor laws were loose back then and the boy managed to land a position selling guidebooks for \$0.50 apiece.

Within a year, he had transitioned to Disney's magic shop, where he learned tricks from the older employees. He experimented with jokes and tried out simple routines on visitors. Soon he discovered that what he loved was not performing magic but performing in general. He set his sights on becoming a comedian.

Beginning in his teenage years, he started performing in little clubs around Los Angeles. The crowds were small and his act was short. He was rarely on stage for more than five minutes. Most of the people in the crowd were too busy drinking or talking with friends to pay attention. One night, he literally delivered his stand-up routine to an empty club.

It wasn't glamorous work, but there was no doubt he was getting better. His first routines would only last one or two minutes. By high school, his material had expanded to include a five-minute act and, a few years later, a ten-minute show. At nineteen, he was performing weekly for

twenty minutes at a time. He had to read three poems during the show just to make the routine long enough, but his skills continued to progress.

He spent another decade experimenting, adjusting, and practicing. He took a job as a television writer and, gradually, he was able to land his own appearances on talk shows. By the mid-1970s, he had worked his way into being a regular guest on *The Tonight Show* and *Saturday Night Live*.

Finally, after nearly fifteen years of work, the young man rose to fame. He toured sixty cities in sixty-three days. Then seventy-two cities in eighty days. Then eighty-five cities in ninety days. He had 18,695 people attend one show in Ohio. Another 45,000 tickets were sold for his three-day show in New York. He catapulted to the top of his genre and became one of the most successful comedians of his time.

His name is Steve Martin.

Martin's story offers a fascinating perspective on what it takes to stick with habits for the long run. Comedy is not for the timid. It is hard to imagine a situation that would strike fear into the hearts of more people than performing alone on stage and failing to get a single laugh. And yet Steve Martin faced this fear every week for eighteen years. In his words, "10 years spent learning, 4 years spent refining, and 4 years as a wild success."

Why is it that some people, like Martin, stick with their habits—whether practicing jokes or drawing cartoons or playing guitar—while most of us struggle to stay motivated? How do we design habits that pull us in rather than ones that fade away? Scientists have been studying this question for many years. While there is still much to learn, one of the most consistent findings is that the way to maintain motivation and achieve peak levels of desire is to work on tasks of "just manageable difficulty."

The human brain loves a challenge, but only if it is within an optimal zone of difficulty. If you love tennis and try to play a serious match against a four-year-old, you will quickly become bored. It's too easy. You'll win every point. In contrast, if you play a professional tennis player like Roger Federer or Serena Williams, you will quickly lose motivation because the match is too difficult.

Now consider playing tennis against someone who is your equal. As the game progresses, you win a few points and you lose a few. You have a good chance of winning, but only if you really try. Your focus narrows, distractions fade away, and you find yourself fully invested in the task at hand. This is a challenge of just manageable difficulty and it is a prime example of the *Goldilocks Rule*.

The Goldilocks Rule states that humans experience peak motivation when working on tasks that are right on the edge of their current abilities. Not too hard. Not too easy. Just right.

THE GOLDILOCKS RULE

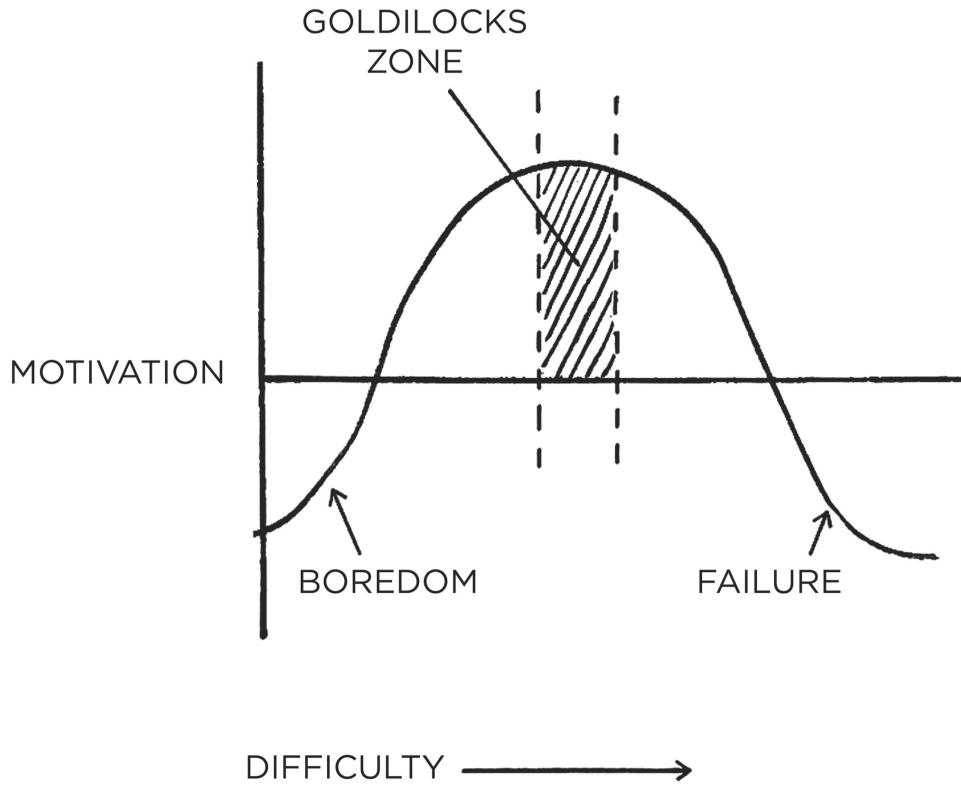


FIGURE 15: Maximum motivation occurs when facing a challenge of just manageable difficulty. In psychology research this is known as the Yerkes-Dodson law, which describes the optimal level of arousal as the midpoint between boredom and anxiety.

Martin's comedy career is an excellent example of the Goldilocks Rule in practice. Each year, he expanded his comedy routine—but only by a minute or two. He was always adding new material, but he also kept a few jokes that were guaranteed to get laughs. There were just enough victories to keep him motivated and just enough mistakes to keep him working hard.

When you're starting a new habit, it's important to keep the behavior as easy as possible so you can stick with it even when conditions aren't perfect. This is an idea we covered in detail while discussing the 3rd Law of Behavior Change.

Once a habit has been established, however, it's important to continue to advance in small ways. These little improvements and new challenges keep you engaged. And if you hit the Goldilocks Zone just right, you can achieve a *flow state*.*

A flow state is the experience of being "in the zone" and fully immersed in an activity. Scientists have tried to quantify this feeling. They found that to achieve a state of flow, a task must be roughly 4 percent beyond your current ability. In real life it's typically not feasible to quantify the difficulty of an action in this way, but the core idea of the Goldilocks Rule remains: working on challenges of just manageable difficulty—something on the perimeter of your ability—seems crucial for maintaining motivation.

Improvement requires a delicate balance. You need to regularly search for challenges that push you to your edge while continuing to make enough progress to stay motivated. Behaviors need to remain novel in order for them to stay attractive and satisfying. Without variety, we get bored. And boredom is perhaps the greatest villain on the quest for self-improvement.

HOW TO STAY FOCUSED WHEN YOU GET BORED WORKING ON YOUR GOALS

After my baseball career ended, I was looking for a new sport. I joined a weightlifting team and one day an elite coach visited our gym. He had worked with thousands of athletes during his long career, including a few Olympians. I introduced myself and we began talking about the process of improvement.

"What's the difference between the best athletes and everyone else?" I asked. "What do the really successful people do that most don't?"

He mentioned the factors you might expect: genetics, luck, talent. But then he said something I wasn't expecting: "At some point it comes down to who can handle the boredom of training every day, doing the same lifts over and over and over."

His answer surprised me because it's a different way of thinking about work ethic. People talk about getting "amped up" to work on their goals. Whether it's business or sports or art, you hear people say things like, "It all comes down to passion." Or, "You have to really want it." As a result, many of us get depressed when we lose focus or motivation because we think that successful people have some bottomless reserve of passion. But this coach was saying that really successful people *feel* the same lack of motivation as everyone else. The difference is that they still find a way to show up despite the feelings of boredom.

Mastery requires practice. But the more you practice something, the more boring and routine it becomes. Once the beginner gains have been made and we learn what to expect, our interest starts to fade. Sometimes it happens even faster than that. All you have to do is hit the gym a few days in a row or publish a couple of blog posts on time and letting one day slip doesn't feel like much. Things are going well. It's easy to rationalize taking a day off because you're in a good place.

The greatest threat to success is not failure but boredom. We get bored with habits because they stop delighting us. The outcome becomes expected. And as our habits become ordinary, we start derailing our progress to seek novelty. Perhaps this is why we get caught up in a never-ending cycle, jumping from one workout to the next, one diet to the next, one business idea to the next. As soon as we experience the slightest dip in motivation, we begin seeking a new strategy—even if the old one was still working. As Machiavelli noted, "Men desire novelty to such

an extent that those who are doing well wish for a change as much as those who are doing badly.”

Perhaps this is why many of the most habit-forming products are those that provide continuous forms of novelty. Video games provide visual novelty. Porn provides sexual novelty. Junk foods provide culinary novelty. Each of these experiences offer continual elements of surprise.

In psychology, this is known as a *variable reward*.^{*} Slot machines are the most common real-world example. A gambler hits the jackpot every now and then but not at any predictable interval. The pace of rewards varies. This variance leads to the greatest spike of dopamine, enhances memory recall, and accelerates habit formation.

Variable rewards won’t *create* a craving—that is, you can’t take a reward people are uninterested in, give it to them at a variable interval, and hope it will change their mind—but they are a powerful way to amplify the cravings we already experience because they reduce boredom.

The sweet spot of desire occurs at a 50/50 split between success and failure. Half of the time you get what you want. Half of the time you don’t. You need just enough “winning” to experience satisfaction and just enough “wanting” to experience desire. This is one of the benefits of following the Goldilocks Rule. If you’re already interested in a habit, working on challenges of just manageable difficulty is a good way to keep things interesting.

Of course, not all habits have a variable reward component, and you wouldn’t want them to. If Google only delivered a useful search result some of the time, I would switch to a competitor pretty quickly. If Uber only picked up half of my trips, I doubt I’d be using that service much longer. And if I flossed my teeth each night and only sometimes ended up with a clean mouth, I think I’d skip it.

Variable rewards or not, no habit will stay interesting forever. At some point, everyone faces the same challenge

on the journey of self-improvement: you have to fall in love with boredom.

We all have goals that we would like to achieve and dreams that we would like to fulfill, but it doesn't matter what you are trying to become better at, if you only do the work when it's convenient or exciting, then you'll never be consistent enough to achieve remarkable results.

I can guarantee that if you manage to start a habit and keep sticking to it, there will be days when you feel like quitting. When you start a business, there will be days when you don't feel like showing up. When you're at the gym, there will be sets that you don't feel like finishing. When it's time to write, there will be days that you don't feel like typing. But stepping up when it's annoying or painful or draining to do so, that's what makes the difference between a professional and an amateur.

Professionals stick to the schedule; amateurs let life get in the way. Professionals know what is important to them and work toward it with purpose; amateurs get pulled off course by the urgencies of life.

David Cain, an author and meditation teacher, encourages his students to avoid being "fair-weather meditators." Similarly, you don't want to be a fair-weather athlete or a fair-weather writer or a fair-weather anything. When a habit is truly important to you, you have to be willing to stick to it in any mood. Professionals take action even when the mood isn't right. They might not enjoy it, but they find a way to put the reps in.

There have been a lot of sets that I haven't felt like finishing, but I've never regretted doing the workout. There have been a lot of articles I haven't felt like writing, but I've never regretted publishing on schedule. There have been a lot of days I've felt like relaxing, but I've never regretted showing up and working on something that was important to me.

The only way to become excellent is to be endlessly fascinated by doing the same thing over and over. You have to fall in love with boredom.

Chapter Summary

- The Goldilocks Rule states that humans experience peak motivation when working on tasks that are right on the edge of their current abilities.
- The greatest threat to success is not failure but boredom.
- As habits become routine, they become less interesting and less satisfying. We get bored.
- Anyone can work hard when they feel motivated. It's the ability to keep going when work isn't exciting that makes the difference.
- Professionals stick to the schedule; amateurs let life get in the way.