Self-determination

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposes that we each have psychological needs and when we fulfil those needs we experience optimal motivation and wellbeing. You can use the principles of SDT to help you stay motivated across all areas of life, including your studies.

Our basic needs

SDT proposes that no matter where you are or to which culture you belong, you have three basic psychological needs:

- **The Need for Autonomy** – the freedom to pursue things that are important and meaningful to you.
- **The Need for Competence** – the opportunity to develop and display your skills.
- **The Need for Relatedness** – the closeness and understanding that comes from meaningful relationships with other people.

Any given situation might not fulfil all of these needs, but chances are if it doesn’t address at least one then you won’t feel very motivated. Take a moment to think about how each of these needs is fulfilled in your life. What is meaningful and important to you? Where and when can you show off your skills? Which are your most meaningful relationships.

University and basic needs

Let’s consider how university life might fulfil (or not fulfil) each of these basic needs, and how this might affect your motivation:

- **Autonomy** – if you feel pressured to study law when you’d rather be studying chemistry then you might find it hard to stay motivated.
- **Competence** – if you are struggling to get good marks you might be feeling deflated and not very motivated.
- **Relatedness** – if you are finding it hard to make new friends or don’t have anyone who understands the pressures of uni life then you might feel isolated and unmotivated.

Take action to fulfil your basic needs

Here are some things you can do to fulfil your basic needs and increase your motivation at uni:

- **Autonomy** - it might be time to ask yourself some big questions. Are you studying something that is important and meaningful to you? If you could study anything, what would that be? Talk to friends, tutors, lecturers and counsellors to help yourself discover how university life can help you pursue these things that are really meaningful to you.
- **Competence** – if you’re struggling to perform well, have you sought out help from friends, tutors and lecturers? Ask yourself if this is this really your area of strength? What are you really good at? What skills do you want to develop and share with the world?
- **Relatedness** – if you don’t have any meaningful relationships with people at uni then it might be time to socialise a bit more. Could you join a club or society and meet similar people? Have you attended any uni events? If you’re shy, maybe you could attend a workshop on making new friends? Look around – there are thousands of people to connect with at uni. Surely one of them is just waiting to strike up a friendship with you!
Goals and decisions

Setting goals and making decisions go hand-in-hand. To set and achieve your academic goals you will need to decide what they are and how you’ll know once you have achieved them.

Three steps to goal setting

1. Identify your short-term (e.g. this semester) and long-term (e.g. throughout your degree) goals. What do you want to accomplish in school this semester? What was troubling about last semester that you would like to fix? What do you want to be doing five years from now? Elaborate on your goals in detail. Write them down, map them out, and then create a list of goals.

2. Generate statements for each goal that clearly describe the circumstances that would convince you and others that you’ve fulfilled that goal. For instance, you’ll definitely know that you’ve achieved your goal of getting a HD when you see your academic statement come through. Write these indicators of success next to each goal.

3. Keep the list handy and review periodically. How are you going? Have any indicators of success presented themselves? What is one small step you could take today towards one of your goals?

Once you have your goals you can use them as motivational tools. When you’re feeling weighed down by an assignment then try visualising the goal you are pursuing. If the assignment is an important part of you getting that HD, imagine opening your results email and finding a HD waiting for you. Imagine the pride you will feel and how enjoyable it will be to share your success with the people you care about. Each assignment is a milestone on the journey to that moment.

Making decisions

Have you ever stopped to think about how we make decisions? Usually we employ one or more of the following strategies:

- Follow the rules; do what has always been done.
- Rationalise by weighing up options and their consequences
- Decide on the basis of what others want or value
- Decide based on intuition and feelings
- Compromise to ensure everyone gets some benefit
- Seek expert advice

But how do you know which strategy to use and when? Try adding a few more steps to the decision-making process and you’ll be making better, more considered decisions in no time:

- Start by clarifying your intentions and values. Why are you making this decision? What do you think is the right thing to do?
- Define your goals and be specific about what you want.
- Gather all the information that is relevant to the decision.
- Employ one or more of the strategies above that is in line with your goals, values, and the information you have gathered.
- Evaluate the decision before acting. What are the consequences of acting? What other options are available?

This material was adapted from the Setting and Reaching Goals handout from CarnegieMelon Academic Development (www.cmu.edu/academic-development).

Videos

What is important to you and what do you really value in your academic life? In under 5 minutes you can learn about letting your values motivate you as you pursue meaningful academic goals.

Ever wonder what economists from MIT and Carnegie Mellon have to say about motivation? Us neither but this video explains some surprising results from their studies on human motivation.
See also

- What if you tried a new study schedule for the next 30 days?
  Google engineer Matt Cutts makes pursuing something new and interesting sound downright easy.
- The psychology of time
  Psychologist Phillip Zimbardo provides a brief but valuable perspective on time, and how the way we view time can change how to pursue our goals and relate to others.