

STUDY MANAGEMENT & MOTIVATION

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HOW DO I GIVE UP SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK 'N' ROLL TO DEVOTE MYSELF TO STUDYING?

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Ever thought that you're really quite a bright student – but just plain lazy? If only you could devote enough time and effort to writing those essays or revising for those exams, everything would be OK. But how many times have you woken up on a Monday morning, promised yourself that this is the dawn of the new hard-working you, only to find that your

willpower and motivation to study has flown out of the window even before lunchtime on Day 1?

These are issues that face nearly all students at some time during their career. How can I motivate myself? How can I stop being distracted from my studying? How do I acquire the willpower to continue studying even when I find it tedious and unrewarding?

Success in dealing with these problems can be achieved by asking yourself a few very basic questions: (1) what are my current study patterns? – are they likely to promote studying or to disrupt it? (2) when I study, do I clearly define what I want to achieve in that study session? And (3) How can I motivate myself to study? The following sections explain how to answer these questions and should enable you to construct your own efficient and effective study plan.

1. WHAT ARE MY CURRENT STUDY PATTERNS?

It is quite likely that your current study patterns have developed in a rather haphazard way. This includes where you study, when you study and how long you study for. You need to be fully aware of these patterns before you can change them effectively.

1.1 *Am I aware of how much I study each week?*

- If you were asked how much you studied last week, would you be able to give an accurate reply? Could you even say with any real accuracy how long you studied for yesterday? This is important because it is difficult to change a behaviour if you have very little awareness or recollection of it.
- You can increase self-awareness of your behaviour by keeping a detailed diary for a couple of weeks of exactly how long you study for, what times of day you study and where you study. Simply keeping a detailed record in this way often helps you to increase that behaviour anyway – which is a bonus! You may find that each week you want to try and improve on the amount you studied in the previous week.



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1.2 *What kinds of environments do I study in?*

- Where you study is as important as how long you study for. Make a note of where you study because it may be somewhere where there are distractions – even if there are no other people around! We'll talk about how to deal with these in section 4.

1.3 *What events tend to precede or follow a study session?*

- You should also keep a note of what events precede a period of studying and what events end a period of studying. These can be important determinants of your ability to persist with a period of study. You can print out and use the record sheet in Table 1 to help you record these events. You may find some events that consistently precede studying (and so may be events that facilitate studying) and some that consistently follow studying (and may have an important influence on whether you found that study session enjoyable or not).



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2. **HOW DO I DEFINE MY STUDY GOALS – WHAT DO I WANT TO ACHIEVE?**

Whenever you sit down to study you should have a very clear idea of what it is you want to achieve in that session. This means making some clear decisions about the goals of the session.

2.1 *How do I decide what the goals are for a study session?*

- If you are tackling an essay question, then make sure that you have a clear idea in your head of the sequence of things you need to do before you start. This might be (1) collect together suitable reading material, (2) read and make notes, (3) structure my essay, and (4) write my essay. Each of these is a separate task and so defines a separate goal. You should attempt each in turn and reward yourself when you have completed each (e.g. take a well-earned cup of coffee).



Make sure you have a clear idea in your head of the sequence of things you need to do before you start studying

- If you're writing an essay – take a look at “What do I need to do to write a good essay?” This will help you to structure this activity and to define a series of separate goals towards finalizing the end product.

- You must set yourself attainable goals. Don't sit down to start studying saying to yourself "I'm going to sit here until I've finished this piece of work – whatever it takes!" The chances are that you'll probably give up well before you've finished what you intended – especially if it's a difficult and lengthy piece of work. Remember, not achieving a study goal that you set yourself is tantamount to punishing that behaviour – so it becomes more difficult to get yourself to study in the future.



You must set yourself attainable goals. Not achieving a study goal that you set yourself is tantamount to punishing studying.

- An 'attainable' goal is one that you are 100% certain you can achieve. If you've just come back from a holiday and finding it difficult to return to studying, then make sure you set yourself a truly attainable goal before rewarding yourself for achieving it. This may be something like reading for just 15 minutes! That may sound trivial, but doing this successfully makes it much easier to continue studying later.
- There may be many temptations to study when you haven't planned to – such as when your friends say "we're all going to the Library to do some work – why don't you come and join us?" If this happens, don't just sit down and start reading or writing in an unplanned way, think first of all about what you might like to achieve from this spontaneous and unplanned study session.

3. **WHAT THINGS DO I NEED TO DO TO ACHIEVE MY STUDY GOALS?**

Once you've set some attainable goals for your study sessions, there are a number of things you can do to help achieve those goals

3.1 *Getting started is always hard – how can I make this easier?*

- Everyone knows from experience that when you sit down to study it's that first sentence that is the most difficult to write and the first page that is the most difficult to read. However, you can get started on a study session much easier if you ensure that there is something 'easy' for you to do when you start.



You can get started on a study session much easier if you ensure that there is something ‘easy’ for you to do when you start.

- For example, if you are carrying on from some work you did yesterday, always make sure you quit that previous session at a point where the next bit of work is relatively easy to do. It might be something as simple as checking your spelling or a routine task like collating your references, but make it easy so that the study session begins with as little pain and angst as possible!



If you are carrying on from some work you did yesterday, always make sure you quit that previous session at a point where the next bit of work is relatively easy to do

- There is always a temptation to end a study session when you have completed a significant piece of work (e.g. when you’ve completed reading an article or writing an important section of an essay). But before you quit that session completely, take some time to think about what your next study session will be and how you will start it. This will get you into the next study session more easily.



Before you quit a study session completely, take some time to think about what your next study session will be and how you will start it.

3.2 *How do I stop myself getting bored or distracted?*

- Be organized. First, make sure you have in front of you only those notes, books, articles etc. that you will need for the study session. Also make sure that you know what each item is and where it is on your desk. There can be nothing more disrupting than being unable to find an article or a set of notes in a huge pile of papers or in an over-full folder. Not only is this disruptive, but it interrupts your train of thought and can frustrate you to the point of quitting for an – undeserved – cup of coffee.



Be organized. First, make sure you have in front of you only those notes, books, articles etc. that you will need for the study session. Also make sure that you know what each item is and where it is on your desk

- Develop a routine. It helps to begin each study session in the same way and to proceed through a study session in a routine fashion. This helps to make your study behaviour more mechanical and less dependent on you having to think carefully about everything you do. This can involve being routine about simple things such as how you get your book out of your bag, where you place your pens and papers on the table, using the same study environment as often as possible, and so on.



Develop a routine. It helps to begin each study session in the same way and to proceed through a study session in a routine fashion

- Make sure there is something pleasant at the end of the study session. When you have achieved your study goals this may be something as simple as a cup of coffee with friends, watching a favourite TV programme, or simply a feeling of satisfaction that you've worked hard and achieved some important goals.



Make sure there is something pleasant at the end of each study session

4. **HOW DO I MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS WHEN I'M STUDYING?**

Common experiences during a period of studying are such things as lack of ability to concentrate, beginning to feel bored, distracting thoughts – such as wanting to have a cup of tea, or physical distractions – such as someone passing by the window. There are a number of fairly simple steps you can take to try and control these experiences.

4.1 *Where should I study?*

- Many people end up studying in whatever suitable space they can find – at their kitchen table, in their study-bedroom, in the Library, or on the

sofa in their lounge. However, a simple fact of life is that if you do things in that environment other than study, then that environment will acquire the ability to trigger these other behaviours.



If you do things in a particular environment other than study, then that environment will acquire the ability to trigger these other behaviours.

- For example, if you study in your kitchen, that environment also controls many behaviours other than studying, such as eating, chatting, putting the kettle on, preparing food, etc., so while you're studying you may continually feel the urge to be distracted by some of these other behaviours.
- Even a study-bedroom is not ideal. This environment also controls sleeping behaviour! So, it is quite possible that you could easily begin to feel tired if you study in this environment.
- The best environment to study in is one in which you do nothing else other than study. Good examples are the Library or, if you have enough space at home, a room set aside specifically and solely as a study.



The best environment to study in is one in which you do nothing else other than study.

- Having only one environment in which you exclusively study also has positive advantages. It will enable you to settle down to studying more quickly (because it does not also control other behaviours), and should also allow you to study for longer. Ensuring that stimuli in the environment are also similar each time will also help (such as always using the same coloured pen, keeping items on the desk in similar positions each time you study, etc.).

4.2 *How can I minimize physical distractions?*

In addition to working in an environment that is used exclusively for studying, you can take a few basic precautions to minimize physical distractions.

- Working next to a window with a stimulating view may be OK (such as a view over the countryside), but you don't want a view that is likely to

include movement and distraction (such as a view onto a street). Any movement across your field of view will automatically be distracting and take attention away from the studying task.



Working next to a window with a stimulating view may be OK, but you don't want a view that is likely to include movement and distraction.

- Don't have your mobile phone on during a study session. The vast majority of calls are not that important that you need to answer them immediately! If you think you might expect calls from friends or family during a study session, make sure you call them first – prior to the session.



Don't have your mobile phone on during a study session

- Learn to say “No” to other people's demands – at least while you are studying. You can make sure you've dealt with any possible distracting issues before you start studying, and stick to a “closed door” policy while you are studying.



Learn to say “No” to other people's demands – at least while you are studying.

4.3 *How can I focus my attention on my work during a study session?*

- To help you focus on your work during a study session, make sure that you've got all the books, articles, notes, stationery materials, etc. you need before you start. Not having a spare pen will be very distracting if the one you're using runs out.



To help you focus on your work during a study session, make sure that you've got all the books, articles, notes, stationery materials, etc. you need before you start

- In your study environment, try and make sure there's plenty of academic material rather than leisure-time material. For example, better to have a motivational poster up on the wall or a even a poster giving the dates of your examinations, than one of your favourite rock band. Don't forget, you are trying to create a truly academic atmosphere which stimulates academic thought.



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- If your mind is beginning to wander, go back and read what you have already written, or re-read a section of a book that you are familiar with and understand – this will retain your attention on academic matters.



If your mind is beginning to wander, go back and read what you have already written, or re-read a section of a book that you are familiar with and understand

5. HOW DO I MOTIVATE MYSELF?

Knowing what you have to do is one thing – *doing it* is often quite another! Most students at some time or other experience a lack of motivation for studying and feel they don't have the 'willpower' to study as much as they would like. However, willpower is not some mystical characteristic possessed by some people and not others; it is largely about how you reward yourself for those behaviours that you want to facilitate.

5.1 *How can I reward myself for studying?*

- For studying to become a regular feature of your life, you need to feel that it is enjoyable, and a behaviour becomes enjoyable to the extent that it has positive, rewarding or pleasurable outcomes. Very often, this can be accomplished simply through the satisfaction of setting and meeting achievable study goals – but in many cases you may need to do more than this.



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- It is often the case that study sessions end with a natural reward, such as leaving the confines of the study environment (e.g. a Library) to have a refreshing cup of coffee and a chat with friends, or to go and have lunch or supper if you're hungry, or a relaxing work-out at the gym.
- If these natural rewards do follow study sessions, then use them wisely to ensure you reward appropriate study behaviour. For instance, you may decide to spend two hours in the library writing an essay and then reward yourself for this effort by going and having a coffee and a chat with friends. However, you may find that you are working so well that you continue writing until your concentration and motivation begins to wane - then you go off for coffee. With all the good intentions in the world, what has happened is that you have inadvertently rewarded behaviours consistent with falling levels of concentration and motivation rather than the two hours focused work that preceded this. Always ensure that the things you like doing (i.e. rewards) occur *immediately after* the behaviour you want to foster (i.e. concentrating).

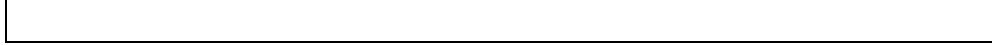


Always ensure that the things you like doing (i.e. rewards) occur *immediately after* the behaviour you want to foster (i.e. concentrating).

- You will usually find that you don't have to think up new ways to reward yourself for studying. Things you enjoy doing are probably already available on a daily basis, you simply need to ensure that you schedule these enjoyable things so that they immediately follow a period of studying. Table 2 shows a set of normal daily activities that can be rescheduled in a different order to ensure that pleasurable activities follow the behaviours you want to promote (such as studying).



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6. **HOW DO I DEVELOP MY OWN STUDY PROGRAMME?**

All of the examples and advice given in this section on Study Management & Motivation are based on the principles of ***Behavioural Self-Control***.

Behavioural Self-Control is a form of behaviour management based on principles from learning theory. The principles can be used to construct a behaviour change programme for almost any behaviour, and the programme can be managed by the individual themselves to help them both control unwanted behaviour and to facilitate desired behaviours.

This approach to behaviour change is discussed in Chapter 4 of ***Psychopathology***, and the main principles (as applied to studying behaviour) are outlined in Table 3.

TABLE 1**A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF YOUR STUDYING BEHAVIOUR**

In many cases, a *functional analysis* may help to identify the factors maintaining your studying behaviour or – alternatively, identify the factors that disrupt it. A functional analysis is undertaken by keeping a record of the frequency of study behaviours and noting the antecedents and consequences of the behaviour. This will take the form of:

- A What happens before I start to study (the trigger)
- B What studying do I do and for how long? (the behaviour)
- C What happens immediately after studying – is it positive or negative? (the consequence)

A typical ‘ABC’ chart on which to keep records of your study behaviour can look like the following:

Date, Time & Duration of Study Session	Antecedent (what happened before I started my studying session?)	Behaviour (describe exactly what studying you did and for how long)	Consequence (How did the study session end – what did I do next?)	Was the Consequence a positive or negative event (did I enjoy it or not?) (delete as appropriate)
				pos/neg/neutral
				pos/neg/neutral
				pos/neg/neutral
				pos/neg/neutral
				pos/neg/neutral

After a week or two, look closely at any patterns or consistencies between antecedents, study behaviour and its consequences. Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Are there any antecedent events that regularly precede studying? If so, they may facilitate studying and you can then manipulate these antecedents to ensure they occur more regularly.

2. Are there any consequences of studying that end study sessions prematurely? If so, are there ways in which I can control these events to make sure they don't interrupt studying in the future?
3. Are the consequences of studying largely positive or negative? If they are negative, you need to look at ways in which you can replace these consequences with more positive or rewarding events.

TABLE 2**RESCHEDULING YOUR DAILY ACTIVITIES TO REWARD STUDYING**

The following table shows a hypothetical list of normal daily activities for a student in the order they occur during the day. This student has three study periods during the day, but two of them are followed by what the individual perceives as negative experiences (attending a lecture and doing chores).

We can reschedule these activities with relatively little disruption so that all study periods are followed by positive experiences. There is usually no need to introduce new rewards into the schedule to facilitate studying behaviour – you simply need to reschedule current activities to ensure that positively experienced activities contingently follow periods of studying.

Time	Activity	Perceived Valency of Activity	Activities restructured to reward studying	Perceived Valency of Activity
8am	Get up, wash, dress	neutral	<i>Get up, wash dress</i>	<i>neutral</i>
9am	Eat Breakfast	neutral	<i>Eat Breakfast</i>	<i>neutral</i>
10am	Travel to College	negative	<i>Travel to College</i>	<i>negative</i>
11am	Attend Lecture 1	negative	<i>Attend Lecture 1</i>	<i>negative</i>
12noon	Chat with friends; drink coffee	positive	<i>STUDY in Library</i>	?
1pm	Eat lunch	positive	<i>Eat lunch</i>	<i>positive</i>
2pm	Chat with friends; drink coffee	positive	<i>STUDY in Library</i>	?
3pm	STUDY in Library	?	<i>Chat with friends; drink coffee</i>	<i>positive</i>
4pm	Attend Lecture 2	negative	<i>Attend Lecture 2</i>	<i>negative</i>
5pm	Travel Home	negative	<i>Travel Home</i>	<i>negative</i>
6pm	Watch TV; Have Dinner	positive	<i>Watch TV; Have Dinner</i>	<i>positive</i>

7pm	Phone Friends; Chat with housemates; listen to music	positive	<i>STUDY at home</i>	?
8pm	STUDY at home	?	<i>STUDY at home</i>	?
9pm	Wash up dishes; do chores etc.	negative	<i>Phone friends; Chat with housemates; listen to music</i>	<i>positive</i>
10pm	STUDY at home	?	<i>Wash up dishes; do chores</i>	<i>negative</i>
11pm	Watch TV	positive	<i>Watch TV</i>	<i>positive</i>
Midnight	Bed	neutral	<i>Bed</i>	<i>neutral</i>

TABLE 3

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN BEHAVIOURAL-SELF CONTROL PROGRAMME
– PROMOTING STUDYING BEHAVIOUR

How often do you sit down to write an essay or a lab report or do some reading for a seminar, only for your attention to begin to wander almost immediately? After just a few minutes, you are up making a cup of coffee to distract yourself from the difficulty of concentrating on the task in hand.

Below are some examples of how you might apply behavioural self-control principles to help you concentrate more easily when you are studying. All of these principles are based on operant or classical conditioning. When you have read these principles, sit down and write a behavioural self-control programme for your own studying behaviour that takes into account your own learning environment and your personal circumstances.

Reinforcement/punishment: Always try and find some way of rewarding yourself whenever you have achieved a study goal, and make sure that you take this reward immediately on completion of the task. It may be something as simple as a refreshing cup of coffee, a chat with friends, trip to the cinema, or just listening to your favourite music CD.

Response-reinforcer contiguity/contingency: While many people claim to be aware of the principle of operant reinforcement, most rarely apply it consistently. For instance, you may decide to spend two hours in the library writing an essay and then reward yourself for this effort by going and having a coffee and a chat with friends. However, you may find that you are working so well that you continue writing until your concentration and motivation begins to wane - then you go off for coffee. With all the good intentions in the world, what has happened is that you have inadvertently reinforced behaviours consistent with falling levels of concentration and motivation rather than the two hours focused work that preceded this. Always ensure that the things you like doing (i.e. rewards) occur *immediately after* the behaviour you want to foster (i.e. concentrating).

Stimulus Control (Environmental Planning): If you study in an environment that also controls other behaviours, then you will inevitably find it difficult to concentrate solely on studying. For example, if you try and write an essay in your kitchen, that could be very difficult, because a kitchen will also have come to elicit other competing behaviours such as eating, putting on the kettle, etc. To study effectively, you need to do this in an environment that does not control alternatives to studying (e.g a Library is a good example).

Response shaping and the setting of attainable targets: All behavioural programs set attainment targets of some kind, and it is extremely important that any sub-goals in the program are attainable. For example, if studying you must set yourself a goal that you are certain you can achieve (e.g. reading a text book for 15 minutes rather than 6 hours!). It is critical that goals are attainable: if they are not met because they are over-ambitious, then this is tantamount to punishing the effort that was expended in attempting to meet the goal.

Response discrimination/feedback: Can you recall accurately how many hours you have spent studying in the last week? Probably not, and this is because most people have poor recall of the frequency of behaviours they are trying to develop or reinforce. This being the case, it is perhaps not surprising that you may have difficulty controlling your studying – because you are unable to accurately discriminate it or to remember it. One way in which this can be overcome is by including in the program a period of self-observation, where the you record or chart information relevant to studying behaviour (e.g. how many hours you studied each day, what you achieved, and where you studied). This will give you an idea of the baseline frequency with which you study and will allow you to set some future goals that can increase this baseline level.

(From Davey, 2004 – see *Psychopathology*, Chapter 4)