IN TWO MINDS

One of the oddest things about human nature is that we can be in two minds. We can have a conscious intention to do something, but then feel driven to do something else. We can have a gap between motivation and intention.

We bridge this gap using willpower. This is a conscious effort to override your instincts and do something different instead. The trouble is, this takes work, drains energy and is harder to sustain when you’re tired or stressed. You can’t just rely on willpower. You need motivation.

Motivation is a state of energy and action, where you feel excited and tasks feel easy.

Think about what motivates you. What do you find exciting and energising, and why? This is the goal of motivation research: to explore the factors that drive us to succeed, and why some tasks feel easier than others.

THE THREE FACTORS

1. Incentives get us moving and make tasks feel urgent. They push you into action - whether you like it or not.
2. Money is an incentive, but so too are qualifications, promotions, status and basic incentives like safety and security. They can be positive or negative - the carrot, or the stick.
3. Drive pushes you to action. There are many things you feel you need doing, but some things you want to do yourself.

No incentive?
Incentives and drivers can get you going, but for sustainable motivation you also need a third factor: the ability to succeed.

This doesn’t mean the task has to be easy: challenge can be motivating too. You just need to feel success is possible; that your efforts won’t be wasted.

No drive?
Your skills and resources affect your motivation, and support from others too. If you have the drive and ability to do something, you’d think you would just do it! But without an incentive, you may put things off, prioritising more urgent tasks. This is when you need to set goals and intentions, to make your passions a priority.

No ability?
This doesn’t mean the task has to be easy: challenge can be motivating too. You need a third factor: the ability to succeed. To feel motivated, you also need inner drive, a personal connection.

A MISSING INGREDIENT?

If you don’t feel motivated, that will be because one or more of these factors are missing:

- **No ability?** If you don’t feel a task is possible then you will probably give up. In these situations, you need to boost your abilities by gaining skills and resources, or seek help and advice. You might need a confidence boost too, or help seeing the skills you have.
- **No drive?** Without a personal connection to a task, you may do the minimum, working to rule or running on autopilot. You’ll need to increase your autonomy and make the task feel more personal to you - or focus on who needs this doing and why it matters to them.
- **No incentive?** If you have the drive and ability to do something, you’d think you would just do it! But without an incentive, you may put things off, prioritising more urgent tasks. This is when you need to set goals and intentions, to make your passions a priority.

Start by identifying the missing ingredient, and then choose the most effective response.

SETTING GOALS

Goal-setting is great for helping you prioritise your passions. Setting your own goals means you give yourself credit for things you have been putting off, and goal-setting can boost your autonomy and give you a sense of progress.

Don’t wait for the world to give you incentives either. Set your own by giving yourself rewards and making bargains with other people to get important tasks done.

And if all else fails, just don’t do it!
Cross it off your list! But, if you don’t feel you can just stop, then ask yourself why. Is it because you need it and why does it matter to you? What can you usefully do? It may go back on your list, but at least you’ll know the reason.

INTERNALISATION

Internalisation is the process of taking on external goals and connecting them to our world view. Reflecting on how a task fits with your beliefs and life goals can turn external incentives into internal drivers, and make dull tasks feel easier to do.

If you feel stuck, spend a minute writing down how the task relates to the things that matter to you. This simple process can give you more drive to do a task well.