

IN FOCUS

When You Just DON'T WANNA

BY ARRICCA ELIN SANSONE

WE ALL KNOW WHAT WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE DOING: cleaning out the closet, hitting the treadmill, getting that résumé done, [fill in your *ugh* task here]. So why don't we do it? Are we simply unmotivated people? The answer, according to experts, is no. "There's a misconception that some people are and others are not motivated, as if it's a personality trait," says Wendy Grolnick, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Clark University and coauthor of *Motivation Myth Busters: Science-Based Strategies to Boost Motivation in Yourself and Others*. "But there's no scientific evidence that this is true." We're all motivated to do *something*, she adds, but it's not always the most beneficial thing for us. (For instance, you might



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be really motivated to eat a slice of chocolate cake for dinner instead of sheet pan salmon with veggies.)

“Motivation” is generally defined as the energy we put toward an activity. But even if it is an activity we want to pursue, maintaining that energy may be challenging. (Anyone who’s made

a short-lived New Year’s resolution can attest to this.) Life gets in our way and can catch us unprepared to see things through to the end. That’s why, says Grolnick, “we need strategies to keep our motivation going.” Here are the most common motivation killers and how to move past them:

You think the task ahead is harder than it really is.

■ “What stops us is that we think, *This is a big deal!*” says Philip Gable, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and brain science and director of the Interdisciplinary Neuroscience Program

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at the University of Delaware. “But examine the truth. Cleaning out the closet isn’t really that bad. You can break big projects into small ones, like going through the shoes first instead of the whole closet.”

▶ **TRY THIS:** Start with one part of a task. Once you get moving, you may surprise yourself and accomplish more than you’d anticipated—people frequently overestimate how difficult a task will be before starting it. Whatever you do, don’t wait for that mythical moment when you will

have no distractions and plenty of time, or you’ll never get going.

Your schedule doesn’t match your energy level.

■ If you’re a night owl trying to squeeze in a daily workout at dawn, it makes sense that you don’t feel inspired to put your sneakers on first thing in the morning. Sometimes finding motivation is just a matter of tuning

in to your energy level, anticipating your biorhythms, and scheduling accordingly.

▶ **TRY THIS:** For a week or two, follow your body’s cues to go to sleep without imposing a set bedtime on yourself, and keep a log of your energy level throughout each day. Then rethink your routine: If you’re drained by Friday evening, do energy-sapping chores at

the start of the week, says Grolnick. If you're pressing the snooze button every morning, try exercising in the evening.

You lack environmental and/or social support.

■ Both your physical space (including the items around you and your proximity to certain amenities) and the

people you spend time with play a role in motivating (or demotivating!) you. "If you're trying to eat better, for example, but you have candy stashed in the pantry and you see it five times a day, you're eventually going to eat it," says Lisa Hardesty, Ph.D., a psychologist with Mayo Clinic Health System. But if, say, you keep a set of workout clothes in your car, you are more likely to go to yoga when you're on the fence.

▶ **TRY THIS:**

Set yourself up for success by tucking away temptations and/or doing practical things to make it easier to follow through. Ask for what you need! "Get rid of the candy and enlist your family's aid in meeting your goal by saying something like, 'This is important for my health, so here's how I think you can help me,'" Hardesty says. Then ask them for specific encouragement, such as helping you plan a healthy shopping list or cooking dinner with you.



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You're too busy.

■ “The list of things we’re ‘supposed’ to be doing is outrageously long,” says Christopher Bryan, Ph.D., an associate professor of business, government, and society at the University of Texas at Austin. “We just keep taking on more. But we never take a realistic inventory of our priorities.”

▶ **TRY THIS:** Ask yourself what matters most to you. To lighten your load, Bryan suggests deciding how many responsibilities you can reasonably take on, then making peace with letting the rest go. That way “you’re not wasting energy pursuing things that don’t matter to you or feeling guilty about not doing

something,” he says. If you find it difficult to say no to new projects, respond when asked that you’re tempted but your prior obligations would make it irresponsible of you to take on anything else. This will show the other person not that you think their project isn’t worthwhile but that you’re a good steward of both your time and theirs.

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You put yourself last.

■ Being depended upon by lots of people could sap anyone’s personal motivation at times. “We’re very good at doing for everyone but ourselves,” Hardesty says. “I like to say, ‘In between *selfless* and *selfish* is *self*.’ Where do you place yourself?”

▶ **TRY THIS:** Remind yourself that if you don’t take care of yourself, not only will you be unhappy but that negative energy may spread to other people you care for as well. Regularly make time for things that are energizing to you, from meeting a friend for coffee to engaging in relaxing activities such as sewing and gardening.

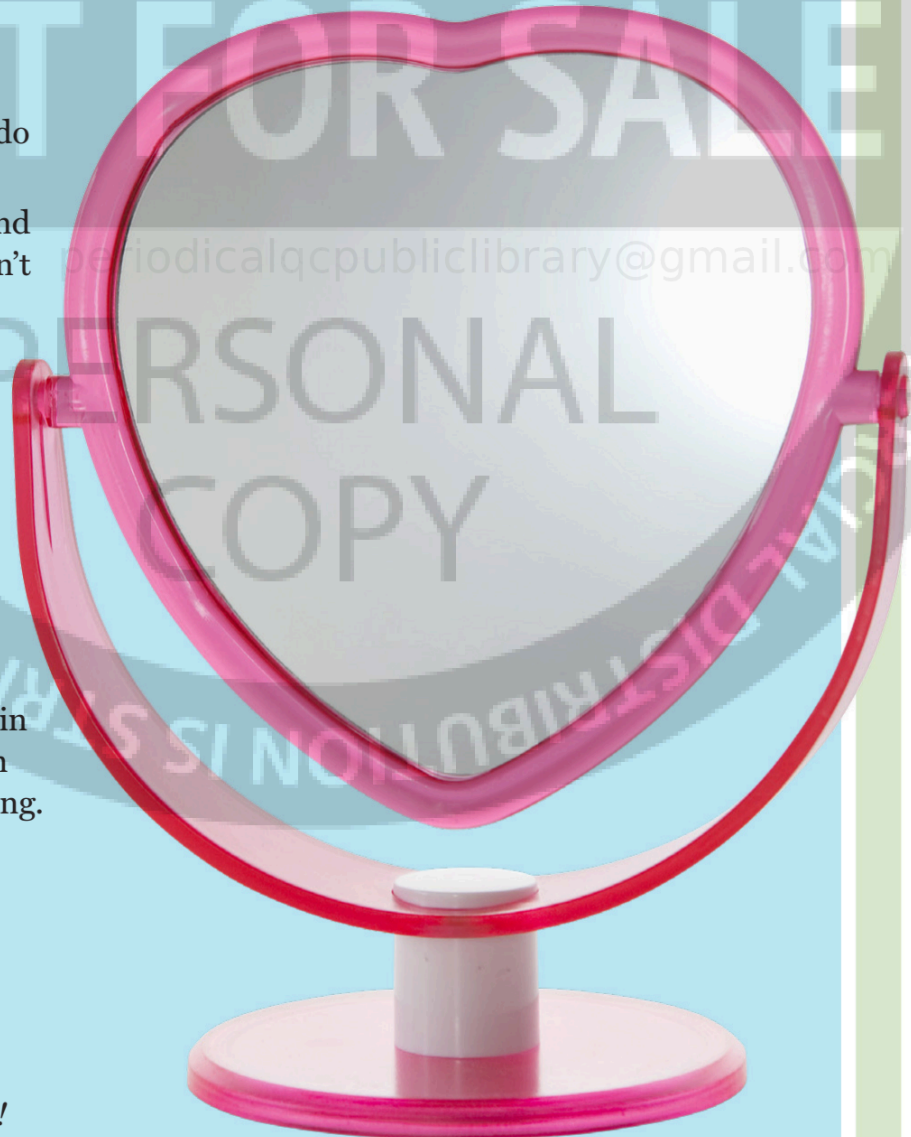
You’re a pro at negative self-talk.

■ We’re all hard on ourselves (*I’m so lazy!*

I’m too disorganized!). But negative self-talk isn’t motivating, says Gable.

▶ **TRY THIS:** How would you talk to a friend to help them with a problem? What would you say to your

friend to aid them in getting started? You’d never say “You’re lazy!” You would probably empathize and encourage them. This approach can help you see yourself with a less self-critical eye.



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