

141. Mastering Self-Discipline Part 4: The Science of Human Motivation how to use it to get more done

Vanessa 00:00

Welcome to the Empowered Brain, the only podcast using science, psychology, and coaching to help you rewire your brain and create a life you love with your host, Dr. Vanessa Calderon, a Harvard grad physician, master coach, and mother of two.

Hey, friends, welcome back to the last part of our mastering self-discipline series. Today we're talking about the science of human motivation. So in part one of this series, we talked about what's actually behind the story we tell ourselves when we don't think we're disciplined enough, because sometimes it's not all about discipline, it's about other things. So go back to that episode first, because you want to get super clear as to what's really behind any idea or any stories you have that you're not getting enough done. In part two of this series, we talked about flow state. In part three, last week, we talked about how to use the science of self-discipline and habit-building to get more done. And today, we're going to talk about human motivation.

Alright, let's just jump right in. So if you are not already familiar with the motivational triad, we have to start there when we're talking about human motivation. So the motivational triad is essentially, the idea the knowing that human beings are wired to do three things. Number one, seek pleasure. So do whatever we can do to get dopamine to be released in our bodies. Avoid pain, including negative emotions. So disappointment, failure, and the thought of working hard, we want to avoid pain at all costs. And we want to conserve energy. So rest when possible, so you have enough energy to hunt. Okay. So that's the motivational triad. Now, human motivation is, is run by many hormones and neurotransmitters in our body, especially dopamine. So we're going to talk a lot about dopamine today and its role. So dopamine is the key neurotransmitter that also works like a hormone in the brain's reward system. Now, it plays a crucial role in motivation, because it reinforces behaviors that lead to outcomes that we have decided are pleasurable outcomes. So when we set a goal and achieve a goal, for example, the brain releases dopamine, creating a sense of reward and satisfaction.

For many of us when we have a task list and we check off boxes on that task list secretes dopamine, which is why it feels so good to get a lot done. But dopamine is also released when we anticipate something happening. So when we anticipate a reward coming, which is why if you're really good at achieving your goals, it feels so good for you to just set goals when you just sit down to set goals or create a vision board that feels so good because your brain is anticipating the release of dopamine. And even the anticipation of the release of dopamine releases dopamine, so it feels really good. Which is why it feels good to set goals. But when you're actually doing the work to achieve your goals, you

need a different part of your brain because dopamine isn't being released when you're actually doing the work.

So as you start setting goals, the brain releases that dopamine in response to the anticipation of achieving that goal. Okay, the other the other reason why dopamine is super cool when it comes to human motivation is because it also helps us focus, it helps us create attention around anything that's going to help us achieve our goals by influencing a part of our brain that's known as the salience system. So this system is super cool because what it starts to do is it starts to detect and assign meaning or significance to things in our environment that are related to helping us achieve our goal. So for example, let's say that you want to buy a red car, and you have a goal that you're going to buy a red car, all of a sudden, what do you start doing, you start seeing red cars everywhere you go. And when you see the red cars, you get excited, feels good.

Because dopamine is being released. It's influencing that salience system, it's getting you excited to get that red car now you're seeing red cars everywhere. Alright, so again, dopamine is released in response to any goal-related stimuli. So something coming around in the environment telling us that we might achieve our goal contributes to motivation, and persistence and helps us achieve those goals by creating that positive feedback loop and making us feel good.

Alright, so what I want to talk to you about this is that dopamine is awesome, and we can use it in our favor. So I'm going to teach you how to use dopamine to help you achieve your goals. When we talk about human motivation, how to use it to sustain your motivation for long-term goals, instead of what we sometimes do, where we deplete our dopamine reserves, alright, so the first thing you want to do when you have a goal is you want to break it down into smaller tasks. So if you have a goal, for example writing a book, let's say you don't want to break that up into smaller tasks. So for me, for example, That's why I have these annual goals, but I break them up into quarterly goals, and then monthly goals, and then even weekly goals sometimes. And the reason why is when you break them up into manageable tasks, what happens is you achieve those smaller manageable tasks earlier, which provides more frequent opportunities to release dopamine, as opposed to saying, You're not going to celebrate until your book is complete.

Because then it feels horrible. It feels horrible the whole time. You're like working and try to write in your book and it feels horrible, and it's hard and you're not getting those small bumps of dopamine to help you. And it's so easy to get that dope those dopamine hits along the way, by setting smaller, more manageable goals. And you might as well do it because we know that when dopamine has been released, it's good for you. It keeps you motivated longer and makes you feel good. It supports your salience system, which means it makes it easier for you to be more focused and productive. So you want that dopamine to be released. So break up your goals into smaller, more manageable tasks. Number two, another way to do this, is to get dopamine to be released in a way where we're like we're actually causing the dopamine release, not and we're actually supporting our brain to secrete more dopamine is we can celebrate those milestones. So you break your goals into smaller tasks, and you celebrate small milestones along the way. Again, this activates dopamine release again. So when you acknowledge yourself for achieving something, any achievement, even small ones, it contributes to that same positive feedback loop.

I finished this, I checked it off my box, it feels so good. Yay, you pause for a second releases dopamine. So this is why I shared with you in Episode 137, how I end my days how I always end my day by celebrating everything I achieved in that day. Because that feels really good. When I sit there and I celebrate. And I pause, it takes me like no more than two minutes to do this at the end of my day. And I pause and I lead on the good, I let him the good and I celebrate what I achieved. And let him the good. It allows my brain to release that dopamine and it feels great. And it been wired my brain to want to do it again tomorrow. And every time you tell yourself, you know, like I didn't get enough, done, I can't celebrate that's not big enough. That doesn't really matter. All it does when you minimize your accomplishment, is accomplishments. All it does is you block yourself from feeling good along the way. And it makes it harder for you to want to do the work later. Because then you're pushing, you're pushing, pushing, pushing against the story that you're not doing enough. Instead of being like, Oh, I did, I did great today. Tomorrow, I'll do more. And so you want to continue to celebrate your rewards along the way.

Next is to create a reward system for yourself. So whenever I'm trying to establish something new or difficult, so when I first started my business I wanted to do Facebook lives a lot and be live on social media, and it felt so uncomfortable. I'd never done it before I had all these stories I was making up, I'm not going to be good enough, people are gonna laugh at me all those things that we tell ourselves. And I had so much insecurity, I was so afraid. And so what I did, because I know that this works, which is why I'm sharing it with you is you can create your own reward system. So I got a jar and I got these yellow, beautiful little pebbles. And they're like these glass yellow petals, because the yellow was going to I knew the yellow would make me feel alive and happy. And every time I would do a live a live event online or I would post something online or I record myself speaking live on Facebook or Instagram, I'd get a little pebble and I'd put it in my jar. And I knew that I was going to put that pebble in the jar every time I did it. And so if that pebble in the jar was my reward system, every time I saw that pebble go into the jar, it secreted dopamine in my brain, which made it feel good for me to do it, which meant I wanted to do it more and more because I could fill up the jar. Same thing with sticker charts, which is why sticker charts work for kids. And I actually would do sticker charts for myself because I thought it would be just fun to do.

So I bought a bunch of stickers online, I got like 500 stickers for like \$6 on Amazon. And I would use those stickers that I create charts and I put those stickers on my chart. The other thing you can do when you're creating a reward system is you can have an accountability buddy. Because if you just message that accountability buddy and their only job is to give you a thumbs up or to be like good job that creates that same reward system. So create that reward system for yourself. When you're starting to do something that feels really uncomfortable. That's new. That's different. Because by rewarding yourself with this one thing that seems so obvious or so simple, it's actually releasing dopamine making it easier for you to do it again tomorrow or again later. Another way that you can support yourself in helping you feel good about releasing your goal achieving your goals and secreting more dopamine is mindfulness and visualization. So I'm gonna talk about visualization first. This visualization is a technique that can help you stay focused. So I really love this. And I use this with my students all the time. And I use this for myself, I visualize myself achieving the goal and how it feels. Don't forget the part of how it feels when you're doing this for yourself.

I visualize myself achieving the goal. And I just tell myself, Oh, that feels so good. I'm so grateful that I was able to do that. I'm so grateful that I took all the actions I needed to take to achieve that goal. And just doing that, by itself, and visualizing starts secreting dopamine when you visualize yourself achieving the goal. And when you visualize yourself achieving the goal, it makes it easier for your brain to realize that it's actually possible for you to do that. And so I said, mindfulness and visualization, so what I do as part of my morning routine every morning, no secret. And so this is my big secret as to why I'm able to achieve so much.

Every morning when I meditate. As part of my meditation routine, I sit down, and I visualize myself achieving everything I want to achieve, achieving all my goals, achieving my goals for the day for the year, and how that actually makes me feel. So there's an invitation for all of you to go out and do that for yourself. It works and it feels amazing.

Next is to establish a routine. So when you can, and we talked about this last week, when we talked about the habit loops and how they reinforce consistent behavior. So when you're reinforcing that consistent behavior by establishing routines, those routines do a few things. One, it keeps you from, you know, getting distracted on things that aren't going to support you in achieving your goal when you have that routine in place already provides that structure for you. It also helps you because when your brain knows that routine is coming, and you achieve the routine, guess what dopamine gets released again. So just a quick side note, these routines, and this habit behavior, I'm sharing with you from my own perspective, and I have a neurotypical brain, I've had a lot of students that have neurodiverse brains or have ADHD, and a lot of the same things still work for them, but some may not. So if this is really resonating with you, try it for yourself. And if you've been noticing, you're able to get things done a different way. That's awesome. Keep doing it the way that works for you. Alright, I'm going to just share a few others that I think are important.

A big one that's really important is you want to start building intrinsic motivation, not just extrinsic things outside of you, motivating you, you want things inside of you, motivating you. So you want to connect your goals to personal values. So for me, for example, my mission in life is to be in service to others. That's my mission, what can I do to do my best to help other people be their best selves, that's my mission in life, do my best to help others be their best selves, that's it, I just want to be in service to the world and make the world a better place. And so for me, when I don't really want to, like record another podcast, or you know, I'm just feeling like, I'm so tired. I remember that, like, Hey, I know that when I put this out there and publish, it's going to help all those people that are downloading the podcast and listening, it's going to help them be able to do just one more thing that's going to help them improve their lives. And that, for me, is how I've tied my goals to my personal values.

So whenever you can tie your own goals to something inside of you like your higher purpose, for example, it will help you stay committed and foster long-term commitment, which is what matters. Because we can sometimes stay committed for a day, that's easy for two days. But can you stay committed for 30 days, for three months for six months, for years? And the way you do that is when you connect your goals, to your higher purpose to something bigger than your personal value, something larger, something outside of you. And that right there, that intrinsic motivation contributes to that

sustained release of dopamine. Like right now even just saying that out loud. And knowing that I'm gonna hit submit on this podcast, and you guys get to hear it. That makes me so happy. releases dopamine for me.

All right, and one of the things that's gonna get in the way here is when you're stressed out or burnt out. So if you're stressed, if you're burned out, it blocks dopamine from being released. So you have to watch yourself, you have to manage yourself from overworking, you know, old me used to just push myself so hard, work harder, work harder, work harder. And I was working hard and I was achieving a lot but it felt horrible. And it caused a lot of stress and it wasn't fun. And there's another way to do it. You don't have to do it. That way. You can not overwork and use all these things from these last four episodes, to really support yourself in achieving in a way that's aligned with the way your brain, your body, your soul really works. That helps you achieve for the long term so you don't burn out in the short term. So a few ways to do that. One is you want to have more Moments of Awareness when you're feeling stressed out.

So I did an entire episode on emotional regulation, it's Episode 94, you can go back and listen to where I give you a bunch of strategies to manage your stress in those acute moments. The other thing that I've started doing is building in recovery and rest days into my week, I have like incredible focus and productive days where I'm just like, going for it working hard. But then I build in recovery in a rest day where I take the day to just go for a run, relax, not think about work, and allow myself to recover. So it's like, I like to think about it as like athletes. I was an athlete when I was younger. And I love the way leads who are really committed to their craft, and not just athletes, but anyone who's really committed to their craft, the what they do how, you know, they're willing to like put in the work to get better and work harder. But they also honor their body and give themselves rest days.

For example, LeBron James, one of the best basketball players of all time, he sleeps more than 10 to 12 hours a day, when he needs it, he takes entire days to just rest, not thinking about that maybe thinking about basketball, I'm not sure I haven't asked him, but definitely not playing the sport. So he allows his body to recover. And that is what's so important because you need to allow your mind to recover. Your mind is your sport, you know, that's when you're going out and you're creating in the world, you got to give yourself those recoveries. And those rest days. When you give yourself recovery and rest days. It allows you to be more focused later, more productive, and more dopamine will be secreted later. So when you're ending your workdays stop work, when you say you're going to stop work and allow yourself to rest.

Alright, so let me see if there's anything else here that I think is really important. We covered so many things. I guess the last thing I will say is if you're if you don't already meditate, I did a podcast episode, I think it's Podcast, episode 11. It's in the very beginning, but I'll link it to the show notes. It's all about how to start meditating. And the reason why I share that is because in my experience, now that I've been practicing meditation and mindfulness for the last 10 years, it will incredibly improve your concentration. And when you can be concentrated and focused, that's when you get into your flow state. And that's what helps you to get be more productive and get more done in a way that's kind to you. And it supports you it helps you not tasks, which in between things, it helps me so that when I get the urge of like, you know, when I'm, normally when I get afraid when I'm doing a task when I feel that

fear, I don't always coat it with my brain as like, Oh, I'm afraid normally what I think is like, oh, man, I need to pause here and I go for my phone. And I want to scroll through social media because that's like my negative procrastination and go on to social media. But now that I've been practicing mindfulness when I get that urge, I notice that I have the urge. And I don't take the action because I have the awareness that it's just an urge, I don't need to take the action.

It helps me stay in the moment and stay focused. That's what's possible when you practice mindfulness meditation. So it's episode number 10, or 11. I go through like the easiest ways for you to get started. So you make meditation, super, super simple, even if you only have a minute a day how to do that. And again, I talked about emotional self-regulation. So that's episode number 94. That'll keep you from, you know, it'll keep you taking action and moving forward in the face of like fear, perfectionism, analysis, paralysis, all those types of things. It's episode number 94. And really, all of these things, what they end up doing is they reduce your impulsivity, so your you know, the likelihood of us being impulsive and moving away from the things we want to create in a day. And it makes us makes it easier for us to manage our own stress in the day. Alright, so let's wrap up quickly.

So we talked about human motivation, and we talked about the motivational triad. Remember, human beings are wired to seek pleasure because it releases dopamine, avoid pain, including negative emotions, like disappointment and failure, and conserve energy whenever possible. Because if you recall, way back in the day, we needed to conserve energy so we could go out and hunt. There are the one neurotransmitter and a hormone that we use in our body to help us with rewards and reinforcement and motivation is dopamine. So we talked to all about dopamine, and how to harness the power of dopamine so that we can continue to use it to achieve big goals.

All right, sweet friends. I hope you found this helpful. I will see you all next week. Hey, sweet friends, if you love what you're learning, then you've got to join us in the journey. It's my all inclusive program and the best community out there giving you the education you never knew you needed to help you create a life you love. Join us Seth Vanessa Calderon md.com forward slash join I'll see you there