

How to Build Self-Discipline and Find Motivation

Pohle, Allison . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]13 Jan 2021.

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FULL TEXT

In brief

- * Write down your goals so you can track your progress.
- * Work to develop a consistent routine and get ahead of bad habits.
- * Don't talk yourself out of something because you are afraid to fail or to succeed.

Simone Biles has made a habit of setting goals each year. "My mom has always made me sit down at the beginning of each year and write down my goals so that I can keep track of what I want to accomplish that year in gym and out of gym," the American gymnast said during an event hosted by Capital One and Visa in December titled "Gold Medal Goals." "It is just a great feeling to get those checked off the list."

Setting goals to work toward is a great first step to give you focus, but there are other steps you can take to keep from being derailed along the way. For Olympic gold medalists, like the rest of us, the same skills are often necessary to establish self-discipline: Overcoming fear and difficult circumstances and breaking bad habits .

Ask yourself some key questions to understand your motivations.

Establishing who you are and what you hold dear can help you to stay on track amid uncertainty, says Luvvie Ajayi Jones, a professional speaker and author of the upcoming book "Professional Troublemaker: The Fear-Fighter Manual."

"Life is so uncertain that if you have certain things that you can always go back to, you will be better for it," she says. "The core of who we are anchors us and keeps us clear even when we're not sure about what we want to do."

If you are unsure how to define who you are, she suggests asking yourself a question. For example:

- * What or who do you hold dear?
- * Who can you answer to?
- * What do you think is worth fighting for?

Focus on what you can control.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, it can be harder to practice self-control. It helps to focus on your mind-set, says retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Jason Roncoroni. He is founder and president of Ordinary Hero Coaching Inc., which provides executive leadership development and coaching for veterans and military leaders who are transitioning to the next step in their careers. He gives the example of a person overwhelmed with concerns about how the Covid-19 pandemic will affect his or her job. If you focus only on fears over lost wages or reduced business, you won't have the capacity to focus on opportunities, says Mr. Roncoroni. Although you can't control the environment, you can control how you respond in it, he says. "Optimism widens the aperture of discovery. You just have to focus on it," Mr. Roncoroni says. He says that during his time in the military serving in Afghanistan, he learned to accept not having all the answers and to remain calm and think clearly. For him, looking out for the people he served with helped him to find purpose, rather than focusing on his anxiety about the uncertainty of his situation.

Try affirmations to pump yourself up.

Some people choose to repeat daily mantras , but what we need to tell ourselves to stay motivated can often change from day to day, says Mrs. Ajayi Jones. For example, if you are struggling with low self-confidence, it might

be helpful to tell yourself, "I am enough," she says.

"With imposter syndrome or with fear, we are sometimes thinking that we have to constantly self-sacrifice or break our backs to be worthy of love or to be worthy of that promotion," says Mrs. Ajayi Jones. "But reminding ourselves that we are enough—it is a power move."

Pick a one-word motivator.

When asked to pick one word that would help shape her goals in 2021 during the "Gold Medal Goals" event, Ms. Biles chose "growth." "Every day and every year, you're trying to grow and be better as a person, as an athlete, and that's why I chose that word," she said. For Katie Ledecky, female swimming's most decorated athlete, with five Olympic gold medals and 15 World Championship titles, the word is "love." She said: "I love swimming, but also just love of others and trying to make love the centerpiece of my life in helping others in need, and loving and respecting everyone."

Develop a daily routine to practice self-discipline.

If you find yourself procrastinating, try planning your day in advance. You can also be more productive if you identify the root of your procrastination. For example, our brains are wired to reward instant gratification over progress toward long-term goals. But if you remove distractions from your work area and break down your task into smaller parts, you have a stronger chance of succeeding.

Top Tip: It is important to make time for rest and self care. Both Ms. Biles and Ms. Ledecky stressed the importance of the naps they take in between their daily training sessions. "I feel like without my naps, I wouldn't reach a lot of my goals," Ms. Biles said.

Get ahead of your bad habits.

If you have developed bad habits, whether you are eating foods that you want to avoid, not exercising as much as you would like or holding a negative mind-set, you might be told to change your behavior, says Mr. Roncoroni. But that can be difficult to do without an enticing reward. Mr. Roncoroni has found it helpful to replace bad habits with better rewards. "Whether it is, 'I'm going to redecorate the house, I'm going to do yard work, or find a job,' whatever that thing is, redefine that reward and figure out the routines that are going to get you there," he says.

If, for example, you set an alarm to get up and go for a run each morning, but get sidetracked because you immediately start scrolling social media while you are still in bed, Mr. Roncoroni suggests mapping out running routes the night before and keeping your phone charging out of reach from your bed. Mr. Roncoroni, who works out in his garage, says that when his wife started parking their car there, he had a perfect excuse to skip his morning workouts. Now, they move the car the night before he plans to exercise so he can work out first thing. "It is replacing that old habit and just trying to get ahead of it," he says.

Write down your goals.

Like Ms. Biles, Ms. Ledecky said she writes down her goals to help keep herself accountable. She has also used visual reminders to help her stay motivated, particularly while she was in college. "I always kept a bulletin board in my room with all my favorite family photos, which really inspired me and motivated me every day to achieve my goals," she said.

Don't wait for permission to pursue those goals.

Oftentimes, people wait to act because they feel afraid, says Mrs. Ajayi Jones. Growing up she wanted to be a doctor, but she got a D in her freshman Chemistry 101 class in 2003. She says she began blogging that semester. What started out as a hobby became her full-time job after she lost a marketing position in 2010. Still, Mrs. Ajayi Jones says it wasn't until two years later—nine years after she began writing—that she called herself a writer. "I think people are often waiting for somebody to kind of give them the permission, so just knowing that there isn't going to be anybody who gives you that permission—you're going to have to give it to yourself—is a practice," she says.

Look around you for motivation.

At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Sean Wen had to close Pinch Boil House, the San Antonio restaurant he co-founded, and place his employees on furlough. He says he had never had so much time to

himself. He was worried about the future of the restaurant industry but tried to think of opportunities. He and his business partner, Andrew Ho, had long wanted to try a restaurant concept mixing two cuisines: Southeast Asian-inspired curry and Texas barbecue. They joined forces with South BBQ & Kitchen owner Andrew Samia to open Curry Boys BBQ, which currently operates out of a small bright pink building in San Antonio.

Mr. Wen says although the community had responded positively and the restaurant has been profitable so far, he still has moments of doubt about whether Curry Boys BBQ will be successful long-term. He says he felt motivated to give it a try because he wanted to give back to the community. "It is a way for us to continue telling the story about what Southeast Asian culture looks like, it is still a way for us to be a part of the industry and to show the community that they can get a little slice of normalcy from us," Mr. Wen says.

Set small, achievable goals.

Progress doesn't happen overnight. If you are working toward accomplishing something physical, such as training for a race, Ms. Leducky suggests having a goal for each individual workout. That way, you can measure accomplishments over time. Ms. Biles adds: "It takes a long time, for us at least, to see progress in goals, because every day can be different, especially in the sport of gymnastics," she says.

Don't talk yourself out of what you want because you are afraid to succeed.

Many people are afraid to fail and suffer from impostor syndrome, which involves feeling as though they don't deserve their successes, says Mrs. Ajayi Jones. But it is also common to be afraid to succeed, she says. "We are afraid of what we might lose when we actually win," she says. Instead of self-sabotaging because we fear losing friends or even ourselves, we would be better served by embracing change. "Who we are today is definitely much better than who we were last year, three years ago or 10 years ago, and that is a gift," she says. Sharing your goals with some people you trust, such as friends or family members, can help to keep you on track. These people may be a source of support, who can lift you up and keep you accountable, Mrs. Ajayi Jones says—even if you feel like giving up.

Resources

* The S.M.A.R.T. System : This technique helps you set goals that are specific (S), measurable (M), attainable (A), relevant (R) and timely (T).

* "Professional Troublemaker: The Fear-Fighter Manual," Luvvie Ajayi Jones' new book, is available for preorder .

What to read next

Further reading

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DETAILS

Subject:	Goal setting; Fear & phobias; Habits; Restaurants; Coronaviruses; Pandemics; COVID-19
Business indexing term:	Subject: Restaurants
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y.
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Jan 13, 2021
column:	Management & Careers

Section:	Business
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
e-ISSN:	25749579
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2477272867
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/newspapers/how-build-self-discipline-find-motivation/docview/2477272867/se-2?accountid=44910
Copyright:	Copyright 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Last updated:	2021-01-13
Database:	ABI/INFORM Collection,U.S. Major Dailies

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