

How to Get Yourself to Practice When You Don't Feel Like It

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Synopsis

Not in the mood to practice or study? Here's a technique to try when your inner drive is nowhere to be found.

You know those days when you soooo do not want to practice (or study, work, or do anything remotely productive)?

Where you sort of putz around the house looking for an excuse to do almost anything else?

On the plus side, I suppose those are the days when the refrigerator gets cleaned out and the bathroom cabinets get organized, but those things don't leave us feeling especially great about ourselves at the end of the day.

Yes, that inner drive sure is nice when it's there, on those days when we feel the motivation to develop our skills, learn new repertoire, or prepare for an upcoming performance or exam.

And sure, there is something to be said for having a non-negotiable daily routine. Or sucking it up and just doing the work. But on days when our willpower is sapped, there's another source of motivation that we might be able to tap into.

It's called the "resumptive drive." Or the Zeigarnik effect (which I think sounds way cooler).

What's this all about?

Waiters and memory

Bluma Zeigarnik described a phenomenon way back in 1927, in which she observed while sitting in a restaurant that waiters seemed to have a selective memory. As in, they could remember complicated customers' orders that hadn't yet been filled, but once all the food had been served (or maybe when the bill was paid?), it's as if the order was wiped from their memory.

Back in her lab, she found that indeed, participants were much more likely to remember tasks they started but didn't finish, than tasks that were completed (hence, the Zeigarnik effect).

Another form of the Zeigarnik effect – and the one more relevant to what we're talking about here – is the observation that people tend to be driven to resume tasks in which they were interrupted and unable to finish.

The resumptive drive

Researchers at Texas Christian University & University of Rochester ran a [study](#) on this form of the Zeigarnik effect.

Subjects were given eight minutes to shape an eight-cube, three-dimensional puzzle into five different forms. They were told to work as quickly as possible, and given three minutes to complete the first two puzzles as practice.

Then they were given five minutes to solve the last three puzzles.

The researchers deliberately made the second practice puzzle difficult – one that was unlikely to be solved within the time available. And just as they had hoped, only 6 of the 39 participants solved the difficult puzzle.

After their time was up, the participants had eight minutes of free time to do as they wished while the researcher running the experiment left the room to retrieve some questionnaires they accidentally forgot to bring, saying they would be back in "5 or 10 minutes." This was all a ruse, of course, to see what the participants would do when left alone.

Despite there being other things in the room to do (e.g. a TV, magazines, newspaper, etc.), 28 of the 39 participants (72%) resumed working on the puzzles.

But wait! That's not the cool part.

The cool part

What's interesting, is that those who *completed* the challenging puzzle were far less likely to resume working on the puzzles in their free time than those who did *not* complete the puzzle.

Of the six who completed the difficult puzzle, only **one** (17%) resumed working on the puzzles (and did so for one minute and 18 seconds).

Of the 33 who did *not* complete the challenging puzzle, **27** (82%) resumed working on the puzzle, and on average, spent more than two and a half times as long (3:20) working on the puzzles.

So, when interrupted in the middle of a task, not only were participants more motivated to resume working on that task, but they also continued working on it for much longer.

Take action

So how can we apply this finding to our practice motivation issue?

There are a couple things you might try.

One, many have found that simply getting started is 90% of the challenge (to be honest, I totally made up that number...but you get the point).

It's like washing dishes. If I have a sink full of dirty dishes, and think about the sink of dishes, I'm likely to put it off. But if all I think about is washing one dish, or simply putting the silverware in the dishwasher, it often ends up being easier to just keep going than it is to stop and leave the task half-done.

So instead of thinking about practicing for an hour, or having to work on 10 excerpts, or memorize a concerto, just tune your instrument. Or play a scale really slowly. Or set the timer for five minutes and pick one little thing to fix. And if at the end of five, you don't feel like continuing, put your instrument away and try again later.

Don't feel like studying? Just crack open the book. Work on one math problem. Write three sentences of your essay. Create two flash cards.

Second, once you've finally gotten yourself into the mood to practice or study, try stopping in the middle of a task. Meaning, if you're working on a tricky passage that has you stumped, test out a few solutions, but leave yourself a few possible solutions remaining before taking a practice break. Stop when you're almost finished solving the math problem. Or in the middle of a sentence.

Frustrating though it might be to leave things hanging, it'll all be worth it if that makes it easier, and more motivating, to pick back up when your practice break is over.

This article was originally published at [The Bulletproof Musician](#).