



# *Affective Center for Therapy*

2560 W. Shaw, Suite 105, Fresno, CA 93711

559.436-0428 Fax: 559.436-0438

## **Blocks to Motivation**

Myron Doc Downing PhD, LMFT

Most of us believe that we should be doing more than we are doing. We feel guilty that we are not living up to our full potential. The messages are a result of what we have heard since we were children, "You're not really trying. You're lazy and irresponsible." Each of these messages becomes a part of our low self-concept and a part of the problem of motivation.

Now as adults, the same thoughts and feelings interrupt your concentration at work and at home. These messages bug you all week and on the weekends. The result is that you then work at trying to change these beliefs by "motivating" yourself to do more. You believe that if you just did more, you would feel good about yourself. The next thing you know is that you have become a human doing, trying and failing, instead of a human being.

### The "Should's"

There are basically three common ways in which you will "try" to motivate yourself. The first is by trying the same technique that your parents used on you, "You should. . . ." Now, it is you giving yourself a lot of "I Shoulds." "I should get the garage cleaned," "I should get that project at work done." But then, once you get the job done, you will turn around and say to yourself, "It shouldn't have taken me as long as it did. I should have done it faster." By laying a lot of "I should's" on yourself, you try to manipulate yourself into working harder, doing more and becoming more constructive. The force which you are using to try to motivate yourself is actually a sense of guilt!

A problem with using guilt as a means of motivation is that it is probably the least effective way of getting anybody, including yourself, to change. When somebody lays a guilt trip on you, you will generally experience anger and a tendency to want to avoid that person. When you "should" on yourself, you will react in the same manner. So, your behavior changes in a negative way. You will actually do less thereby creating more guilt! But, your belief is that you should be doing more. So, you then lay more "Should's" on yourself in a desperate attempt to motivate yourself. As you can see, this is a deadly, downward spiral. Just for you, I have a bumper sticker at the office that says, "Have I Should On Myself Today?"

Another problem of using guilt to motivate yourself is that whenever you feel guilty, you will set yourself up to be punished. As a baby, you were born without any feelings of guilt. As a child, you would write on the wall and feel no guilt until you were told it was wrong and punished for it. You would run through the house stark naked and think it was fun when everyone chased you. The toddler does something that is wrong (but doesn't know it is wrong) and is punished for it and then feels guilty. By the time you have reached the age of nine or ten, you pretty well know what behaviors are considered right or wrong. Then, when you did something that you believed was wrong,

you would feel guilty and automatically expect to receive some form of punishment from Mom or Dad.

As an adult, you set “Shoulds” for yourself that are often unattainable because you are trying to use the “Shoulds” to motivate yourself. But, when you don’t do what you “Should” do, you feel guilty. Since you have become conditioned to the belief that punishment always follows guilt, you will first look around expecting someone to punish you. If no one does, you may start a fight with someone close to you just so you can feel punished. Then, you end up feeling guilty for the fight and so the cycle continues. The “solution” is to add more “shoulds” to your life and more punishment that follows. If you are unable to get someone else to punish you, the “solution” is to punish yourself. You can do this by being depressed, “How can I be happy when I have screwed up so badly?” If that is not enough, I’m sure you will find many other ingenious ways of inflicting injuries on yourself and then adding more guilt—punishment, etc. How is this type of motivation working for you?

### The Lists

A second way in which you can try to manipulate yourself is by setting up lots of things to do, projects to be accomplished. “To Do Lists” can give you a sense of accomplishment as you check them off. However, they can be a major source of stress and anxiety if you keep adding to them as a way of keeping the pressure on yourself to get things done. Some people believe they work better under pressure. “It is the pressure that keeps me running and productive. I believe that if I don’t have all this pressure, I will become what my parents said I would become, lazy, irresponsible and I won’t get anywhere.”

This deep-seated fear that, “I cannot be trusted,” drives you like a relentless task master leaving you no quarter. The real consequence of all this pressure is an increased sense of inadequacy and failure because there is no way that you can get everything done that you have put on your lists. So, while you run harder and make longer lists, you feel worse about yourself and end up accomplishing less and less. You will then conclude that the remedy for your “lack of motivation” is to make more projects to do. A variation of this was seen in the old play, “The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit” which is the story of a salesman in his declining years. He could no longer reach his goals or force himself to run any harder. In this case, the result was a sense of failure, ending in suicide.

The alternative is to trust yourself that if you are not doing what you think “you should do,” or if you cannot find the “motivation” to do what you should do, then the truth is that you do not want to do it. AND you will not do it until you want to do it, and that is OK.

### The Dialogue

A third way in which you may try to “motivate” yourself is by continuing the dialogue and messages that your parents put on you as a child. You have probably heard people doing this out loud. They will often talk to themselves and “give themselves a little pep talk,” “That was a dumb. Stop it.” “Boy, you just blew it again.” In one form or another, these were the messages you were given growing up. Now, since Mom and Dad are not here to “motivate” you, you recreate their words. At first, you say it in your own head. When that does not work, you start saying it out loud

where everybody can hear you. In that way, you believe that you can get other people to join in with you or you can prove to others that you are “really trying.”

The problem with this method is the same as with all types of manipulation. You will react to your own manipulations in the same manner that you reacted when your parents tried to manipulate you using judgments and putdowns. No one likes to be manipulated by anyone, not even by themselves. As a consequence, you will resist the manipulation and accomplish even less!

Obviously, these attempts at motivation which we have been discussing are destructive and counterproductive. They are based on a learned belief that: 1) you can't be trusted, 2) you are not living up to your potential and probably wouldn't if left to your own devices and, 3) you are basically lazy and irresponsible.

### Real Motivation

My experience has been quite the contrary, both with my clients and in my own life. What I have discovered is that I can be trusted. Everything that I am doing is what I want to do and if I am not doing it, it simply means that I don't want to do it bad enough to do it. I have accepted the responsibility for my irresponsibility. **I am choosing to do or not do all of my behaviors!**

Motivation is a lie word. There is no such thing as “motivation.” Motivation is simply wanting to do something bad enough to do it. Once I accept the responsibility for what I am doing, then I can change and do something different.

Confusion can occur when you assume that if you do not enjoy doing something, that means that you did not want to do it. Think of something you told yourself that you did not want to do, but did it anyway. You went to work because you wanted the paycheck and did not want to get fired. You cleaned the house because you wanted a clean house, didn't want to get yelled at or feel guilty. “Your money or your life.” If someone holds a gun on you, you want to give him your money if you want to live. That does not mean you enjoyed doing it nor does it mean that because you choose to give him the money, that it was legal.

### **Confusion can occur when you assume that if you do not enjoy doing something that means that you did not want to do it.**

I was working with a group of ladies from the Kerchoff area of Fresno. They all had small preschool children. They had come in as a group, complaining that they were all experiencing depression. They talked about how they would hurry around in the morning, getting their husband off to work, and then sit down at the table with coffee and try to “motivate” themselves. “I should clean the house,” “I should do the ironing,” or they would make long lists of tasks that they needed to do, as ways to “put the pressure on.” Even talking to themselves, giving themselves a severe “Dutch Uncle” talking to, never seemed to do any good. Finally, around two or three o'clock in the afternoon, they would get up because their kids and husbands would be coming home, drag through the house and do a few things, feeling totally exhausted and like a failure at the end of the day.

I suggested that they become responsible for what they were doing. That is, sit at the kitchen table, drink their coffee and say out loud, “I'm not going to clean the house and I'm not going to iron the clothes or anything else except drink my coffee and

watch TV **until I want to do something different.**” Again, this was to be said out loud so that they could hear it in their own ears about every ten to fifteen minutes. In this way, what they said and what they were doing matched up. At the same time, they were taking back power in their lives by adding the phrase, **until I want to do something different.** Once what you say and do match up, then you are powerful to change. Every one of the ladies came back and said, “You know, once I gave myself permission to sit there and not do anything until **I wanted** to do something different, I found that I couldn’t sit there and do nothing for more than a half hour. Then, I would start to feel like I wanted to get up and do something.” When you try to manipulate yourself, it is like trying to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Nothing gets done, and you end up feeling drained because it takes a tremendous amount of energy when you are working against yourself.

#### Trusting Yourself

It is hard to start trusting yourself but that is what loving yourself is all about. Loving yourself wisely is trusting that you will do what you need to do and not do what you do not want to do. It is not your “nerves” or your “mother” keeping you back. It is not the way you were raised that keeps you back. You are not a failure if you do not do something that your head says you should do, it is simply because you are choosing not to do it, for whatever reason! And that is OK because you will do it when it becomes important enough to you.

The truth is, as you take care of you in a positive selfish sense and accept the responsibility for your behaviors, you will have more energy and be able to take care of others. Until you are ready to love yourself as you would love your neighbors, you will feel inadequate and like a failure and look for ways to “motivate” yourself that will only lead to a low self-image and an increased sense of personal failure.

*Myron Doc Downing PhD. LMC77*

[DocDowning@att.net](mailto:DocDowning@att.net)

[www.MyronDocDowning.info](http://www.MyronDocDowning.info)