Get Off Your Butt: 16 Ways to Get Motivated When You’re in a Slump

By Leo Babauta

Even the most motivated of us — you, me, Tony Robbins — can feel unmotivated at times. In fact, sometimes we get into such a slump that even thinking about making positive changes seems too difficult.

But it’s not hopeless: with some small steps, baby ones in fact, you can get started down the road to positive change.

Yes, I know, it seems impossible at times. You don’t feel like doing anything. I’ve been there, and in fact I still feel that way from time to time. You’re not alone. But I’ve learned a few ways to break out of a slump, and we’ll take a look at those today.

This post was inspired by reader Roy C. Carlson, who asked: “I was wondering if you could do a piece on why it can be hard for someone to change direction and start taking control of their life. I have to say I’m in this boat and advice on getting out of my slump would be great.”

Roy is just one of many with a slump like that. Again, I feel that way sometimes myself, and in fact sometimes I struggle to motivate myself to exercise — and I’ll use that as an example of how to break out of the slump.

When I fall out of exercise, due to illness or injury or disruption from things going on in my life, it’s hard to get started again. I don’t even feel like thinking about it, sometimes. But I’ve always found a
way to break out of that slump, and here are some things I’ve learned that have helped:

1. **One Goal.** Whenever I’ve been in a slump, I’ve discovered that it’s often because I have too much going on in my life. I’m trying to do too much. And it saps my energy and motivation. It’s probably the most common mistake that people make: they try to take on too much, try to accomplish too many goals at once. You cannot maintain energy and focus (the two most important things in accomplishing a goal) if you are trying to do two or more goals at once. It’s not possible — I’ve tried it many times. You have to choose one goal, for now, and focus on it completely. I know, that’s hard. Still, I speak from experience. You can always do your other goals when you’ve accomplished your One Goal.

2. **Find inspiration.** Inspiration, for me, comes from others who have achieved what I want to achieve, or who are currently doing it. I read other blogs, books, magazines. I Google my goal, and read success stories. Zen Habits is just one place for inspiration, not only from me but from many readers who have achieved amazing things.

3. **Get excited.** This sounds obvious, but most people don’t think about it much: if you want to break out of a slump, get yourself excited about a goal. But how can you do that when you don’t feel motivated? Well, it starts with inspiration from others (see above), but you have to take that excitement and build on it. For me, I’ve learned that by talking to my wife about it, and to others, and reading as much about it as possible, and visualizing what it would be like to be successful (seeing the benefits of the goal in my head), I get excited about a goal. Once I’ve done that, it’s just a matter of carrying that energy forward and keeping it going.

4. **Build anticipation.** This will sound hard, and many people will skip this tip. But it really works. It helped me quit smoking after many failed attempts. If you find inspiration and want to do a goal, don’t start right away. Many of us will get excited and want to start today. That’s a mistake. Set a date in the future — a week or two, or even a month — and make that your Start Date. Mark it on the calendar. Get excited about that date. Make it the most important date in your life. In the meantime, start writing out a plan. And do some of the steps below. Because by delaying
your start, you are building anticipation, and increasing your focus and energy for your goal.

5. **Post your goal.** Print out your goal in big words. Make your goal just a few words long, like a mantra (“Exercise 15 mins. Daily”), and post it up on your wall or refrigerator. Post it at home and work. Put it on your computer desktop. You want to have big reminders about your goal, to keep your focus and keep your excitement going. A picture of your goal (like a model with sexy abs, for example) also helps.

6. **Commit publicly.** None of us likes to look bad in front of others. We will go the extra mile to do something we’ve said publicly. For example, when I wanted to run my first marathon, I started writing a column about it in my local daily newspaper. The entire island of Guam (pop. 160K) knew about my goal. I couldn’t back down, and even though my motivation came and went, I stuck with it and completed it. Now, you don’t have to commit to your goal in your daily newspaper, but you can do it with friends and family and co-workers, and you can do it on your blog if you have one. And hold yourself accountable — don’t just commit once, but commit to giving progress updates to everyone every week or so.

7. **Think about it daily.** If you think about your goal every day, it is much more likely to become true. To this end, posting the goal on your wall or computer desktop (as mentioned above) helps a lot. Sending yourself daily reminders also helps. And if you can commit to doing one small thing to further your goal (even just 5 minutes) every single day, your goal will almost certainly come true.

8. **Get support.** It’s hard to accomplish something alone. When I decided to run my marathon, I had the help of friends and family, and I had a great running community on Guam who encouraged me at 5K races and did long runs with me. When I decided to quit smoking, I joined an online forum and that helped tremendously. And of course, my wife Eva helped every step of the way. I couldn’t have done these goals without her, or without the others who supported me. Find your support network, either in the real world or online, or both.

9. **Realize that there’s an ebb and flow.** Motivation is not a constant thing that is always there for you. It comes and goes, and comes and goes again, like the tide. But realize that while it may go away, it doesn’t do so permanently. It will come back. Just stick it out and wait for that
motivation to come back. In the meantime, read about your goal (see below), ask for help (see below), and do some of the other things listed here until your motivation comes back.

10. **Stick with it.** Whatever you do, don’t give up. Even if you aren’t feeling any motivation today, or this week, don’t give up. Again, that motivation will come back. Think of your goal as a long journey, and your slump is just a little bump in the road. You can’t give up with every little bump. Stay with it for the long term, ride out the ebbs and surf on the flows, and you’ll get there.

11. **Start small. Really small.** If you are having a hard time getting started, it may be because you’re thinking too big. If you want to exercise, for example, you may be thinking that you have to do these intense workouts 5 days a week. No — instead, do small, tiny, baby steps. Just do 2 minutes of exercise. I know, that sounds wimpy. But it works. Commit to 2 minutes of exercise for one week. You may want to do more, but just stick to 2 minutes. It’s so easy, you can’t fail. Do it at the same time, every day. Just some crunches, 2 pushups, and some jogging in place. Once you’ve done 2 minutes a day for a week, increase it to 5, and stick with that for a week. In a month, you’ll be doing 15-20. Want to wake up early? Don’t think about waking at 5 a.m. Instead, think about waking 10 minutes earlier for a week. That’s all. Once you’ve done that, wake 10 minutes earlier than that. Baby steps.

12. **Build on small successes.** Again, if you start small for a week, you’re going to be successful. You can’t fail if you start with something ridiculously easy. Who can’t exercise for 2 minutes? (If that’s you, I apologize.) And you’ll feel successful, and good about yourself. Take that successful feeling and build on it, with another baby step. Add 2-3 minutes to your exercise routine, for example. With each step (and each step should last about a week), you will feel even more successful. Make each step really, really small, and you won’t fail. After a couple of months, your tiny steps will add up to a lot of progress and a lot of success.

13. **Read about it daily.** When I lose motivation, I just read a book or blog about my goal. It inspires me and reinvigorates me. For some reason, reading helps motivate and focus you on whatever you’re reading about. So read about your goal every day, if you can, especially when you’re not feeling motivated.
14. **Call for help when your motivation ebbs.** Having trouble? Ask for help. Email me. Join an online forum. Get a partner to join you. Call your mom. It doesn’t matter who, just tell them your problems, and talking about it will help. Ask them for advice. Ask them to help you overcome your slump. It works.

15. **Think about the benefits, not the difficulties.** One common problem is that we think about how hard something is. Exercise sounds so hard! Just thinking about it makes you tired. But instead of thinking about how hard something is, think about what you will get out of it. For example, instead of thinking about how tiring exercise can be, focus on how good you’ll feel when you’re done, and how you’ll be healthier and slimmer over the long run. The benefits of something will help energize you.

16. **Squash negative thoughts; replace them with positive ones.** Along those lines, it’s important to start monitoring your thoughts. Recognize negative self-talk, which is really what’s causing your slump. Just spend a few days becoming aware of every negative thought. Then, after a few days, try squashing those negative thoughts like a bug, and then replacing them with a corresponding positive thought. Squash, “This is too hard!” and replace it with, “I can do this! If that wimp Leo can do it, so can I!” It sounds corny, but it works. Really.