

JAMES CLEAR

How to Get Motivated When You Don't Feel Like It

You've probably noticed that it's hard to be motivated all the time.

No matter what you are working on, there are bound to be days when you don't feel like showing up. There will be workouts that you don't feel like starting. There will be reports that you don't feel like writing. There will be responsibilities that you don't feel like handling. And there will be "off days" when your energy and emotions are in the gutter.

These fluctuations are part of life, and I face these motivational challenges just as much as the next person. However, for the important things in my life, I've also developed a system for dealing with these "off days."

Let's talk about that system and how it can help you perform well even when you're not feeling motivated.

What Baseball Can Teach You About Getting Motivated

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I played baseball for 17 years, mostly as a pitcher. During my final season, I had a pretty good year. I was selected to the All-Conference team, I was chosen as the top male athlete at my university, and I was named to ESPN's Academic All-America team

(<https://s3.amazonaws.com/jamesclear/Posts/2008-ESPN-Academic-All-America-Baseball.pdf>).

But it wasn't always that way...

Just a few years earlier, I was the only junior to be cut from my high school varsity baseball team. I played on the JV squad with all of the sophomores and didn't make the varsity team until my senior year ... when I threw a whopping 11 innings all season.

There are dozens of reasons for my transformation from high school through college (great teammates, coaching, work ethic, and so on), but there is one thing that I learned to do in college that I wish I had learned much earlier...

I developed a pre-game routine that allowed me to perform well, regardless of whether I was motivated or not.

How You Can Use a Pre-Game Routine to Get Motivated

One thing that makes baseball different from most other sports is the sheer number of games that are played. Major League Baseball teams play 162 games in a season — twice as many as the NBA and ten times as many games as the NFL. Even high school baseball players will routinely play 40 to 60 games each year.

With so many games, there will always be days when you don't feel motivated, when your body is tired, or you're just not mentally "up" for the game. In that way, I'd say that baseball is a lot like life. There will always be days when the things that are important to you feel like a grind.

But the game is going to be played whether you feel like playing or not, so you better figure out a solution to overcoming your lackluster emotions. I did this by developing a pre-game routine that would automatically pull me out of a funk and push me over that threshold to perform well.

Here's what my pre-game routine looked like...

Grab a baseball and my glove. Jog out to the outfield foul pole. Jog across along the outfield wall. Stop at the opposite foul pole. Stretch hips and hamstrings. Jog back along the outfield wall. Toss lightly, working back to 75 feet or so. Head to the bullpen. Stand one step behind the mound and toss three or four times from there to the catcher. Step up onto the mound. Toss a few pitches without going into the full windup. Start throwing from the windup for 10 pitches or so. Throw from the stretch for 10 pitches or so. Finish with one of each pitch (change up, curveball, fastball in, fastball out). Walk to the dugout.

That whole sequence usually took 20 to 25 minutes and I did it the same way every single time.

While this routine physically warmed me up to play, it also — and perhaps more importantly — put me in the correct mental state to compete at a high level. Even if I wasn't feeling up for the game at the beginning, by the time I finished my pre-game routine, I was in "game mode."

In other words, it didn't matter if I came to the ballpark motivated to play. My pre-game routine started a cascade of internal events that pulled me into the right frame of mind and made it more likely that I would succeed.

Imagine if you had a routine that could pull you into "exercise mode" or "work mode", no matter how little motivation you had at the start.

If you look at top performers in any field, you'll see similar patterns all over the place. NBA players who do the same thing before every free throw shot. Comedians who recite the same words before they step onto stage. Corporate executives who follow the same meditation sequence every morning.

Do you think these people always feel motivated? No way. There are some days when the most talented people in the world wake up feeling like sluggish lard bombs.

But they use their pre-game routines to pull them into the right mental state, regardless of how they feel. You can use this same process to overcome your motivation threshold and consistently exercise, study, write, speak, or perform any other task that is important to you.

Here's how to do it...

How to Get Motivated: 3 Steps For Developing Your Routine

Step 1: A good pre-game routine starts by being so easy that you can't say no to it. You shouldn't need motivation to start your pre-game routine.

For example...

- eat breakfast
- put in my contact lenses
- make my bed

- My writing routine starts by getting a glass of water. So easy, I can't say no.
- My weightlifting routine starts by putting on my lifting shoes. So easy, I can't say no.
- My pitching routine started by picking up a baseball and my glove. So easy, I couldn't say no. (Also, my coach would have yelled at me.)

The most important part of any task is starting. If you can't get motivated in the beginning (<https://jamesclear.com/twyla-tharp>), then you'll find that motivation often comes after starting. That's why your pre-game routine needs to be incredibly easy to start.

For example, you could create an exercise routine that starts with filling up your water bottle. That way, when you don't feel like working out, you can simply tell yourself, "Just fill up the water bottle." Your only goal is to start the routine and then continue from there.

For more about the importance of getting started, read this (<https://jamesclear.com/start-succeed>).

Step 2: Your routine should get you *moving* towards the end goal.

Most of the time, your routine should include physical movement. It's hard to think yourself into getting motivated.

Here's why...

- getting out of bed
- physically making my bed
- so I won't be tempted to go back to sleep

What is your body language like when you're feeling unmotivated or lacking energy?

Answer: You're not moving very much. Maybe you're slumped over like a blob, slowly melting into the couch. This lack of physical movement is directly linked to a lack of mental energy.

The opposite is also true. If you're physically moving and engaged, then it's far more likely that you'll feel mentally engaged and energized. For example, it's almost impossible to not feel vibrant, awake, and energized when you're dancing.

While your routine should be as easy as possible to start, it should gradually transition into more and more physical movement. Your mind and your motivation will follow your physical movement.

Related: physical movement doesn't have to mean exercise. For example, if your goal is to write, then your routine should bring you closer to the physical act of writing.

Step 3: You need to follow the same pattern every single time.

The primary purpose of your pre-game routine is to create a series of events that you always perform before doing a specific task. Your pre-game routine tells your mind, “This is what happens before I do ____.”

Eventually, this routine becomes so tied to your performance that by simply doing the routine, you are pulled into a mental state that is primed to perform. You don't need motivation, you just need to start your routine.

If you remember the article on the 3 R's of Habit Change (<https://jamesclear.com/three-steps-habit-change>), then you may realize that your pre-game routine is basically creating a “reminder” for yourself. Your pre-game routine is the trigger that kickstarts your habit, even if you're not motivated to do it.

This is important because when you don't feel motivated, it's often too much work to figure out what you should do next. When faced with another decision, you will often decide to just quit. However, the pre-game routine solves that problem because you know exactly what to do next. There's no debating or decision making. You just follow the pattern.

How to Get Motivated: Make Excellence a Routine

You can train yourself for success just as well as you can train for failure.

Today you may be saying, “I need to be motivated to get anything done,” but I guarantee that it doesn't have to be that way. If you've taught yourself to believe certain limitations, then you can also teach yourself to break through them.

The patterns that you repeat on a daily basis will eventually form the identity that you believe in and the actions that you take. You can transform your identity (<https://jamesclear.com/identity-based-habits>) and become the type of person who doesn't need motivation to perform well.

This is why it's so critical to do your pre-game routine every time, not just when you're struggling with a lack of motivation. These small behaviors reinforce your good habits and the feelings that come with them. Pretty soon,

your pre-game routine will not only be a trigger that kickstarts your habit, but also a reminder of what you're working towards and the type of person you are becoming.

This is the difference between approaching life as a professional or an amateur (<https://jamesclear.com/professionals-and-amateurs>).

If you only work when you feel motivated, then you'll never be consistent enough to become a pro. But if you build small routines and patterns that help you overcome the daily battles, then you'll continue the slow march towards greatness even when it gets tough.

P.S. If you want more practical ideas for how to build new habits (and break bad ones), check out my book *Atomic Habits* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/atomic-habits>), which will show you how small changes in habits can lead to remarkable results.
