

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY KNOWING WHAT MATTERS TO YOU

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Where do we find

the energy to achieve big, long-term goals? How can we persevere over time and through adversity, to create something that requires a commitment of several years?

It has to matter to you.

Not just a little bit. *It has to matter to enough that you'll see it through.*

When someone calls me for coaching, once we've established the goals they want to accomplish, one of the first questions I ask is, "*Why is it important for you to reach these goals?*"

If the reason is something like, "My parents want me to..." or "My boss wants me to..." or "I'm supposed to..." I know we have some work to do before we get to the nuts and bolts; because somebody else wanting us to do something is rarely a strong enough motivation to make changes in our lives.

And reaching big goals usually requires making big changes in or lives.

Changing behavior, learning new skills, overcoming personal limitations, all take consciousness, time and willpower. Habits are powerful forces; we can change them but not lightly. Frankly, we have to have a darned good reason to change.

And we have to have a darned good reason to maintain these new habits over time and through adversity.

Willpower works like a muscle: it strengthens with use over time, but it also takes energy. When our reserves get depleted – through fatigue, hunger, or overuse – it can weaken. But what if we have to do things anyway? What if we're tired, hungry, exhausted from overworking all day, and we still need to endure to finish something important?

I think we've all been there at some point, and somehow we rise to the occasion. How can this be when our

willpower is spent? What makes the difference?

What it all comes down to is that we care enough.

Big things can happen when something matters enough to us. I love the saying from the Canadian pastor Basil King, “*Be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid*”; but it’s hard to be bold with something we don’t care about.

Sometimes money can be enough of a motivation. Researchers have found when people who used their willpower to the point of fatigue were paid enough, they could overcome their fatigue and actually perform as well as those who were fresh.

Helping others also can mean enough for us to tap into something deeper and carry on. The bottom line is when it matters enough to us we can do it; even when we’re worn out. If it doesn’t, we won’t; even if everybody else thinks we should.

This is why it’s so hard to get someone *else* to make the changes *we think* they should make! This is why parents get gray hair hounding their kids and fretting about what they *should* do, but don’t; why couples drive each other crazy trying to change *each other*; and why addicts don’t stop using until *they* feel the gravity of their own situation.

We don’t make changes or endure through the depletion of our willpower unless we care enough to do it.

How does this ability to push through our fatigue work? Do we grow in willpower? Sort of. We get depleted when we do things that require self-control – making decisions, putting off short term desires, focusing our attention in the face of distractions.

We *don’t* get depleted, though, from doing rote tasks – copying documents, adjusting equipment, doing dishes... things that don’t involve making decisions. So what we may be doing in order to keep going is doing more rote tasks, to keep up the momentum, while we also do the willpower-fatiguing tasks. We lean on the rote things a bit more to get us through.

That’s the strategy we may use, but what inspires us to pull out the stops and use that strategy is that we care enough to do it.

If there’s something you have to complete, but you’re exhausted and having trouble drawing on your extra strength to see it through, think about why you’re doing it.

Is there a way to look at it that’s more meaningful? If you have it framed in your mind that you’re doing it because your boss, or someone else, thinks it’s important, see if you can define what’s in it for you – or how it will help someone who matters to you. Imagine how you or they will benefit from sticking with it. If you can find the meaning, you can find the motivations. And then you’ll probably see it through.

That’s good for short term rallies. But the truth is willpower *does* get depleted. If we don’t get enough sleep, enough food, enough rest, we’re going to have a harder time concentrating and directing ourselves consciously. Knowing this allows us to schedule time for recharging and otherwise taking care of ourselves.

If we want the best from ourselves, over time, we need to get good sleep; we need to eat well, we need some physical exercise, we need to take a break every so often, to refresh and relax, so we have all our resources available.

We need to take care of our health and well-being in order to bring our best to what we do over time.

Human beings are *extremely* resilient, and we have backup systems. We are made for adversity; and part of our resilience comes from that reserve tank we can draw from when we need it.

But it all comes back to whether or not we care. What matters to you may not matter to anybody else. What makes all the difference in the world is that whatever it is, it matters enough *to you*.

PS: *A Master's Course in Happiness* can help you to take charge of your habits and your life in ways you may not have thought possible; and my new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you grow a deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well.

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