

10 Psychological tricks to get your Phd started and keep it running

1. Setting the right goals:

Research has shown that the way of goal-setting has a big impact on the performance quality associated with the target. According to the Goal-Setting-Theory by Locke and Latham (1990), targets should ideally be a) specific and b) hard, yet achievable:

a) Specific:

Try to be as precise as possible when setting your goals. Statements like ‘I will do my best!’ are as worse as it can possibly get because you cannot appropriately measure ‘your best’. Thus, ‘giving your best when writing’ can mean writing that a single word can be considered your best. On the contrary, setting a clear target (e.g. ‘I would like to finish the results section today!’) allows a clear measurement and self-evaluation.

b) Hard, yet achievable:

Goal setting is a way to motivate yourself. However, you can only derive motivation from a target that is neither too easy nor too hard. Writing one sentence in a week is probably lacking as much of motivation as the goal to complete your PhD within one year. Use your or your peers’ experience to set realistic goals, e.g. ‘I want to finish my calculations in this current week!’

By the way, if you think that these are just cheap tricks without any impact, studies show that there can be a performance increase of up to 16% just by setting the right goals...

2. Disassembling your tasks:

Talking about goals you should also try to make sure that the goal is not losing its motivational value by being ‘too big’. Of course getting a PhD is your final goal, yet by having this illusive target only, you may end up lost. Thus, try to set sub-goals, e.g. ‘For my PhD, I need 3 different papers on my topic. In paper one I will conduct an experiment, thus I need a pilot study to check my experimental manipulation. For this, I need subjects and so on.’ Please remember that your final sub-goal is in line with point 1!

3. Give yourself a guilty conscience:

Have you ever missed a target?

For sure!

Did you feel bad afterwards?

Probably not in every case...

One reason for this can be the so called cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962). This concept suggests that humans are unwilling to suffer from cognitive tensions like not reaching a goal that has been set. In order to avoid this kind of dissonance, excuses, etc. are found to ‘calm your guilty conscience’. As an example, not going out to run is not that problematic if your usual jogging partner is not coming with you, right?

However, this cognitive dissonance can be used to encourage yourself as a kind of negative reinforcement. If you set your target as an implementation intention, i.e. as a precise ‘if/then’-phrase there will surely be a bad conscience if the goal is not achieved – and you will want to avoid this next time around resulting in more effort invested reaching your goal. So have the

courage and use your guilty conscience for the sake of your PhD. However, please do not overly use this technique!! ;-)

4. Externalize the trigger of your actions:

Many people struggle initiating goal-related behavior. A good way to counteract this tendency (or at least make sure of a guilty conscience, see point 3) is an externalization of action triggers. Imagine the following situation:

You would like to finish writing your results section but struggle initiating the writing. Instead, you keep checking mails or do teaching preparations that are not very urgent. The problem here is that you yourself have to say: 'Stop! Let's get the writing done!' which needs courage. One solution can be saying: 'OK, as soon as my office-colleague, leaves for lunch I will start writing my results section!'. This external trigger makes it easier for you to start and needs less courage. Just give it try!

5. A very special kind of appointment...

Stress usually occurs when different tasks need to be dealt with at the same time. Teaching, appointments, consultations. Your PhD is usually the last, yet most permanent point on the list...

'Wait a minute... A point on my list?

Why don't I schedule a meeting with my PhD-Thesis?'

It may sound strange at first but if you fix time-slots for work on your PhD, you will probably be more concentrated and minimize the risk for disturbance. As the PhD is the most permanent and regular appointment you have, choose a time that suits you and your writing habits best. And please, do not forget writing down the appointments in your diary!

6. First things first:

You would like to intensively work on your PhD?

Why don't you just skip the early morning mail check and start directly with the first paragraph?

Despite cognitively less challenging tasks like reading and writing mails do not empty your battery too much, it may take the very percent away from you needed for persistent work on your PhD. Thus, just start the day with some intensive tasks and decrease the cognitive challenge the longer the working day lasts...

7. No need to get stuck!

You have reached a point where something like a mental road block has been reached? You are not able to write anything else than bad phrases you will surely delete again?

No need to get stuck!

If you realize that you are not capable of writing something in your PhD-Thesis, why not switching tasks to literature research, calculating or formatting? Different tasks need different areas of your brain and if one is currently out of order, it is pointless to continue. Just use other areas for other tasks until the out of order sign is gone...

8. Take a break!

Breaks are important but not every break is equally suitable to recover from challenging tasks. Instead of rare but long breaks, installing a short break system can be way more beneficial. Several studies have already shown that short breaks (about 5 minutes) after a few hours of work have a better effect on performance than longer breaks after more working hours. So, why not taking three 5 minute breaks *in* 4 hours instead of one 15 minute break *after* 4 hours? (see Wendsche et al. (2016), for more information)

9. Not even an hour? Not even a problem!

Usually, blocking more than one hour for persistent work on one's PhD-Thesis is a hard thing to do. But this is not necessarily a bad thing. As previous points have already implied, efficient work is very important. Thus, efficiently using one hour to work on your thesis, is definitely better than blocking one whole day only to spot that you have a 'bad writing day'. Consequently, try to be flexible and also use short periods to do something for your PhD.

10. Every small bit matters!

'You only managed to write one page today? That's quite a bad performance, right?'

No!

Just as the heading suggests, this one page may only be 1/300th of your complete thesis but is a necessary and important part of the complete PhD. Thus, whenever you have the feeling that an idea needs to be written down or a short pocket of space and time emerges, take some notes. Even though you discard or delete them later on, you have (had) something to build on and save time when making further progress.

Last but not least:

GOOD LUCK TO YOU AND THE BEST OF SUCCESS FROM MY SIDE!!



References:

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- Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (1990). *A theory of goal setting & task performance*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall.
- Wendsche, J., Lohmann-Haislah, A., & Wegge, J. (2016). The impact of supplementary short rest breaks on task performance—A meta-analysis. *sozialpolitik. ch*, 2, 1-24.