

Guide 2

**How to
Maintain
Motivation**



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Introduction

Motivation is crucial when it comes to revision.

Maintaining motivation means finding ways to keep yourself going, even when things get tough. In this guide we have ten tried and tested strategies you can use to maintain your motivation, whether that's over the long-term or during a single session of revision. Read on and see which ones you think will work for you.

1. Big Steps Are Hard to Take

Think about your revision. Think about all of it. Everything you need to do. The whole thing.

Every last bit of it.

Now stop.

That's too much. It's overwhelming. It's unmanageable.

Thinking about all your revision at once is like trying to get from the bottom of a staircase to the top, in one leap.

But how do you actually climb a flight of stairs?

One step at a time.

And, before you know it, you've travelled from the bottom of the stairs to the top. Covering a distance that is pretty much impossible to cover in one go.

Revision is the same.



If you focus on everything you need to do, if you keep thinking about your revision as one giant, oversized mass, it is difficult to maintain motivation.

Big steps are hard to take.

Little steps, on the other hand, are easy. And every successful journey is made up of little steps.

Start thinking about your revision as a series of little steps. Each one easy to take on its own. But put all those little steps together and what do you have? A huge journey completed. A big step taken, towards being successful in your exams.

If you find yourself struggling with motivation during your revision, ask yourself this question:

“ What little step can I take, right now, that will help me in the long run? ”

Usually, the answer is to do a bit of revision, to create some flashcards, or to practice answering some exam-style questions.

When you've done that, ask yourself the following question:

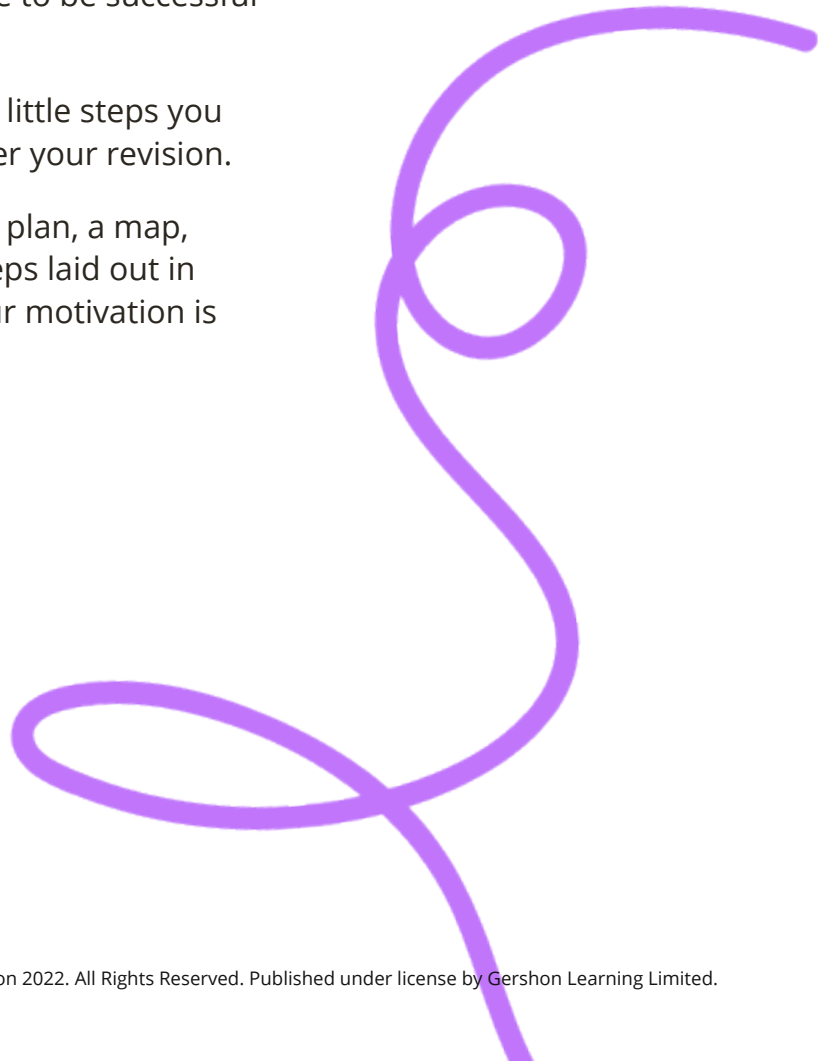
“ What other little steps can I take today, and tomorrow, and next week, that will help me? ”

It's much easier to maintain motivation when you feel like you're achieving something. And little steps are achievable.

One of the best ways to keep yourself motivated and focussed on the little steps you need to take to be successful is to create a revision timetable.

A revision timetable is a collection of all the little steps you need to take to make the big leap. To master your revision.

If you have a revision timetable, you have a plan, a map, a structure. And you can see all the little steps laid out in advance. Then life becomes easier, and your motivation is far more likely to remain high.



2. 40-10

What is the optimal length of time to revise for?

Many people argue that forty minutes is an excellent length of time, followed by a ten-minute break. This is the 40-10 rule.

Forty minutes gives you enough time to focus on a topic you are revising, and also allows you time to do different things, like writing mock answers, creating notes or drawing a mindmap.

The ten minutes is crucial, though, especially for maintaining motivation.

Giving yourself a ten-minute break means giving your brain time to relax and reset itself. This makes it much easier to continue concentrating on what you are revising. Being refreshed means being ready to use all your focus and attention on revising the topic you're working on.

When taking a ten-minute break, it is good to move around. You might get up and go for a quick walk, depending on where you are revising. You might even do a set of star jumps or another exercise. The purpose is to re-energise your body and completely break yourself off from the revision you were doing.

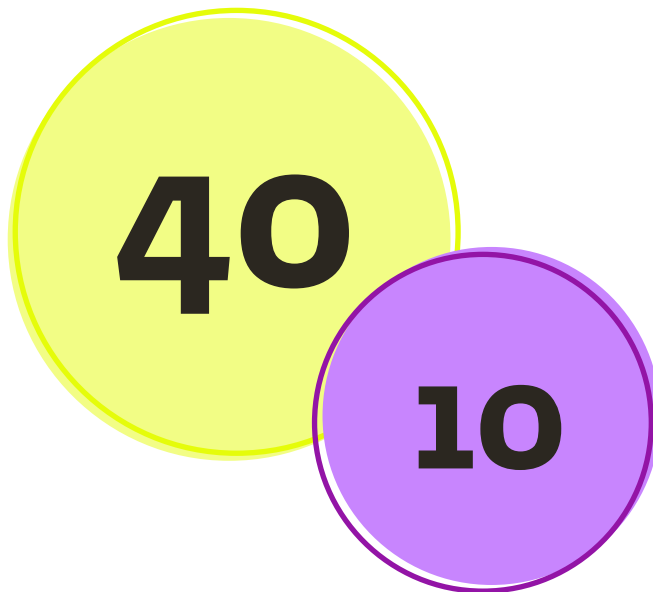
You do need to be careful, though. A ten-minute break can easily become a fifteen- or twenty-minute break.

Be disciplined. Set a timer. Remind yourself that there is another ten-minute break around the corner, once you've completed your next forty minutes of revision.

It's generally easier to maintain motivation when you give yourself breaks and allow your mind to take a rest from revising. If you revise continually for long periods, you can easily deplete your energy and concentration levels. They then take longer to refill.

Most people tend to find that the longer they revise without a break, the less impact the revision has. It doesn't mean that the revision stops having any effect. But it does mean that the amount you get out for the amount you put in starts to decrease.

There are two forces at play then, with the 40-10 rule.



1 First, taking breaks is good for your motivation because it ensures your energy and concentration levels don't get depleted.

2 Second, ensuring your energy and concentration levels don't get depleted means you'll get more out of your revision. And that means what you put in will have a bigger impact, helping you to be more successful.

3. The Jam Jar Technique

One of the hardest parts of revision is maintaining your motivation over time. This is because the end goal – sitting your exams – can feel a long way off. Sometimes, you can even end up feeling like what you are doing in the here and now doesn't really connect to those far off exams.

It's good to find ways to overcome this. To help yourself make the connection between what you are doing today and how it adds to the bigger picture. Both your final exams, and all the other effort you have already put into your revision.

A simple method you can use is the **Jam Jar Technique**.



You'll need three things:

1. An empty jam jar.
2. A bag of uncooked rice.
3. A spoon.

Total cost for the jam jar and rice is about £2, from the local supermarket.

Place the jam jar and rice somewhere you'll be able to see them. This might be in your bedroom, or it might be in the kitchen.

The jam jar is going to capture all the revision you do. That way, you'll always be able to see how much you've done. And you'll always be able to see how what you're doing today connects to the bigger picture.

Here's how the technique works.

Every time you do a chunk of revision, say forty minutes, put a spoonful of rice in the jam jar.

That's it.

I told you it was simple!

What this means is that your revision doesn't disappear into the past. It gets captured, in the jam jar. Each day, you can see the amount of rice in the jam jar growing. This reminds you of all that good work you've done already. It helps you to remember that the revision you are doing today is part of a bigger picture. It's part of you working towards success in your exams.

This is a great way to keep yourself motivated.

And you might even give yourself a reward when you fill the jam jar. Something else to aim for. Then you can start a second jam jar and repeat the process, keeping going right up until your final exams.

4. The Blank Squares Approach

The jam jar technique isn't for everybody. The 'Blank Squares Approach' is an alternative method. You can use it to maintain your motivation and keep yourself focussed on the bigger picture.

Take a sheet of A4 paper and divide it into 20 squares of equal size. You can do this with a pencil and a ruler. Or, if you have a computer and printer, you can create a grid in PowerPoint and print this off.

Your sheet of paper will now have twenty blank squares on it. And you are going to use these to keep track of your revision and to remind yourself of all the work you've done.

Each square is equal to forty minutes of revision. Every time you complete forty minutes of revision, either shade in a square, or cross it off. This way, you get to see how all those little bits of effort you put in build on one another.

Over time, you'll fill up your first sheet of paper. And it might surprise you how quickly you do it. When this happens, give yourself a reward. After all, you've earned it.

Keep the first sheet of paper and then start a new one. This will help you build up a really clear sense of how much hard work you've done, and how it all connects together.

X	X	X	X
X	X		

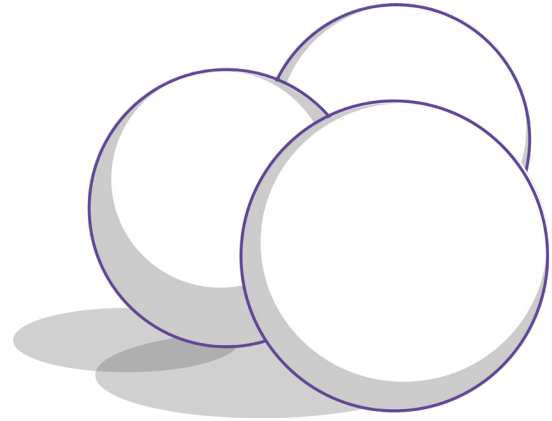
There are a few ways you can adapt this technique as well.

1. You might choose to make a series of sheets of paper with blank squares on them. You can then assign one to each of the different subjects you need to revise. This lets you keep track of how you are getting on with each area of your revision.
2. You might decide you need more frequent rewards to maintain your motivation. That's fine. One option is to have ten blank squares on a sheet. You can then give yourself a reward twice as often. Another option is to stick with the twenty blank squares, but to highlight the tenth square. When you reach the tenth square, give yourself a 'halfway through' reward.

Both these adaptations will help you keep your motivation high.

5. The Ping Pong Ball Method

Imagine you have a stack of flashcards you've created for a topic you're revising. You want to use these flashcards to test yourself. This is a powerful revision technique. The only problem is, you're feeling a bit low on motivation. And you have a lot of cards to get through. What do you do?



One simple tool you can use is the 'Ping Pong Ball Method'. For this, you'll need a large jar or vase, and some ping pong balls (multipacks available on Amazon for between £4 and £10).

Your goal is to fill the jar or vase with ping pong balls. However, you can only put a ping pong ball in the jar or vase if you correctly recall the definition, explanation or answer written on the back of one of your flashcards.

Test yourself using the flashcards and keep going until you have filled the jar or vase with ping pong balls.

Why is this method effective at increasing your motivation?

Filling the jar or vase is a concrete, achievable goal to which your energy is directed. The process of revising using the flashcards becomes tied to this goal. This means you have a short-term target to aim for. Something that feels achievable.

In a way, your revision is piggy backing on the motivation provided by the desire to fill up the jar or vase.

You can extend this technique to other areas of your revision.


For example, you might decide you want to create a set of ten mindmaps for a subject you need to revise. One mindmap for each key topic. To help maintain your motivation, take an empty pint glass and place a ping pong ball in it each time you complete a mindmap. This will help you to visualise how much work you have already done and how much you have left to do.

Another option is to revise with a friend. Here, you each have a jar or vase and a set of ping pong balls. You take it in turns to test each other and see who can fill up their jar or vase the quickest.

6. Mental Contrasting

Mental contrasting is a technique developed by the German psychologist Dr Gabriele Oettingen. It's all about connecting what you want to achieve with what you need to do to achieve it. If you follow the method, you're likely to find your motivation increasing.

Many of us can fall into the trap of dreaming about something we want to achieve. For example, we might dream about becoming a piano player, being able to run a marathon ... or doing well in our exams.



Dreaming like this is good, but it can have unintended consequences.

A little bit of dreaming gives us motivation. A goal to aim for. It can be inspiring. And it can channel our energy effectively. However, if you spend too long dreaming, it can make you less likely to do anything about your dream.

For example, you might be sitting down, thinking about how you want to do well in your exams. You think about what it will be like, how good it will feel and how pleased you will be with what you've achieved.

Only, you spend so long thinking about it, that you don't have time to actually do anything about it. Or it then feels so far off and distant, that it seems like an impossible goal.

This is where mental contrasting comes in.



Oettingen suggests we need to avoid dreaming for too long. A little bit of dreaming is good. That gets us motivated. It gives us a purpose. But what we then need to do is make a contrast. Between then and now. Between what we want to achieve and what we need to do to achieve it.

The easiest way to do this is by turning your goals into 'If ... then ...' statements:

“ If I want to do well in my maths exam, then I will need to revise for two hours a week, every week for the next two months. ”

“ If I want to feel prepared for my dance performance, then I will need to rehearse regularly and use the teacher’s feedback to improve. ”

Writing out a simple statement like this will help you connect your revision goals to the process of achieving them. It will help you to focus on what you need to do next, instead of spending too much time dreaming about the end result.

It’s a tried and tested tool. And you can find out more at WOOPmylife.org, Dr Oettingen’s website.

7. A Change Will Do You Good

There's an old saying: 'Variety is the spice of life.' It's a bit of a cliché, but it has a lot of truth in it.

Spice gives flavour and interest to food. It lifts it beyond the familiar. Variety does the same thing in life. It creates novelty and interest, renewing our motivation and helping us to feel refreshed.

Imagine what it would be like if you never had a holiday. If you just went to school for 52 weeks a year. The lack of variety would feel stifling. You'd want a change.

Or imagine if every football team played in exactly the same way. It would be boring. Variety gives interest. It keeps us engaged.

When it comes to your revision, there's the possibility that your motivation will decrease over time. This may well be caused by repetition. And revision is an inherently repetitive process. You have to repeat things when you practice them. It's inevitable.

You can help yourself to maintain motivation, and avoid feeling bored, by building variety into your revision schedule. By ensuring that you give yourself a chance to experience a change, every now and then.

There are lots of ways to do this.

- 1** For example, you might make sure your revision timetable includes you switching between different subjects and topics (a proven technique in itself), rather than trying to revise an entire subject all in one go, or across a week.
- 2** Or you might make use of a range of revision strategies. Most of us have our favourite techniques, which is fine. But you can bring in a different technique every now and then, as a way of maintaining your motivation.
- 3** Another option is to vary between revising on your own and revising with a friend. Both methods are good. Having a mixture can help to create variety and interest for you.
- 4** Finally, you might like to try sandwiching your revision around a completely different activity, to give your mind a rest and to stimulate yourself through change. For example, you might do 100 minutes of revision (including two ten-minute breaks), then go for a run, do some knitting, work on a jigsaw, call a friend, or walk to the shops, before going back for another revision session.

8. Slay the Procrastination Monster



Procrastination is not your friend. Slaying the procrastination monster means finding ways to overcome that nagging feeling in your mind that you'll leave your revision until later.

Everybody can get their head turned by the procrastination monster. You usually only know it's happening well after it's begun. Like when you look at your watch and realise there's not that long left before the evening's over, and you still need to do the revision you've been putting off.

So how can you slay the procrastination monster?

There are different methods to try. And you need to find the one that works best for you.

First, identify when the procrastination monster is taking over.

Be alert. Notice when you are finding dozens of different things to do before actually settling down to your revision. As soon as you realise this is happening, redirect yourself.

Second, start small.

Procrastination often comes around when we feel like we have too much to do. Putting things off is one way of trying to deal with being overwhelmed, or not knowing where to start. But it's not a great method because at the end of it you find yourself back where you began.

Starting small means picking out one small thing you can do to get going. Like doing twenty minutes of science revision. Once you've done that, you can move to the next thing, and you'll already feel better because you've had a little bit of success – completing that first twenty minutes of revision.

Third, plan rewards for yourself.

Procrastination is often enjoyable because it involves watching television, playing on the computer or talking to a friend. Revision isn't about denying yourself these things. It's just about prioritising.

Prioritise your revision, but plan rewards for yourself. That way, the procrastination monster has less of a hold over you. For example, you might say to yourself: 'I'll do thirty minutes of maths revision, have a ten-minute break, then do thirty minutes of geography. After that, I'll watch whatever I want on Netflix for half an hour.'

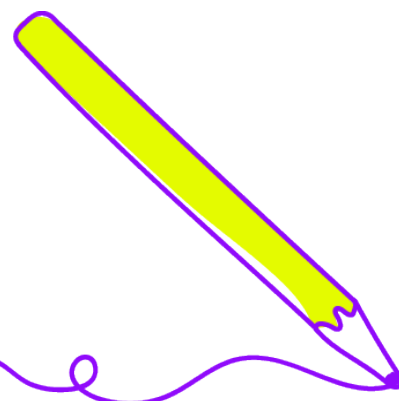
Planning rewards means giving yourself something to work towards. And it means you don't end up feeling like revision is denying you all the things you enjoy. Take control of your priorities and don't let the procrastination monster take control of you.

9. Write Down What You Achieved

You're working hard. You're sticking to your revision timetable. You're making sure you keep the momentum up. And yet, you start to feel your motivation slipping away. Each revision session seems a little tougher than the last. It feels like you're stuck in a bog, trying to pull yourself out. Everything takes more effort. Your concentration isn't quite as good as it was.

What can you do?

Well, one option is to start writing down what you've achieved. This means creating a record of everything you've done. A record you can return to if your motivation sags. One you can use to remind yourself how hard you've been working, what a great job you're doing, and how successful you've been with your revision so far.



A great option is to take a minute at the end of every revision session to write down what you've achieved. You could do this on a sheet of paper, or even buy a little notebook to use. You could call this your '*Revision Record*' or something similar.

When you're writing down what you've achieved, you don't need to go into lots of detail.

You can keep it as simple as writing down the topics you've revised and how long you revised for.

It won't be long before your sheet of paper or notebook starts filling up. You can then look back and instantly remind yourself of how hard you've been working, all the effort you've been putting in, and what a great job you're doing!

This is seriously motivational. It helps you recognise your own efforts, as well as the time and energy you've been devoting to your revision.

It's particularly helpful if you find yourself feeling demotivated, or like you're stuck in a bog, struggling to drag yourself forwards. A quick review of your 'Revision Record' will remind you how far you've come. It'll remind you of everything you've achieved so far. This will give you a boost. And it will help raise your motivation levels back to where you want them to be.

10. Take a Break and Move Your Body

Your motivation to revise can sag in two different ways. It might sag in general terms, where you feel like the whole effort of revision is a big ask. Lots of the strategies we've looked at so far are about helping you to overcome this and to maintain your motivation over time.

But it might also sag in the short-term. Like during a revision session.

Imagine you're revising history, or psychology, or chemistry. You've planned to do forty minutes, take a ten-minute break and to then do another forty minutes.

All is going well... until, you suddenly find your motivation slipping away from you in the second part of your revision. This can easily happen. And it could happen to any of us.

What to do?

One of the simplest, and most effective, things to do is to take a break and move your body.

Even if you've had a break relatively recently, it won't hurt to take another one, especially if you keep it short and focus on using it to move your body.

That might mean walking around your house, doing some star jumps, running to the end of your garden and back, walking

to the end of your road and back, or just doing some stretches. Whatever method you choose, the goal is the same: to reinvigorate yourself by moving around.

Exercise has long been known to improve our mood, make us feel better and help us deal more successfully with negative emotions like boredom, apathy and frustration.

Exercise is like a free gift from nature. You can do it anytime, pretty much anywhere, and even a little bit will help lift your mood.

When you're revising for an extended period, it's easy to end up sat down, in the same position, and for a good chunk of time to pass without you realising.

This can easily lead to your motivation fading.

If you find yourself in this position, remember these three words: Move Your Body. It doesn't need to be a workout. Any kind of movement is good. Walking, jumping, stretching. Even something like juggling can get your blood flowing and your mood improving. So take the opportunity to move, and see what happens.

