STARS: S T A R S

MOTIVATION

"I'm just not motivated to study" is a common complaint heard in the Academic Resource Center. Since everything you do is the result of your motivation, you can see how important it is to understand what motivates you. Is it a good idea to promise yourself rewards if you get your work done? Should you punish yourself if you don't get it done? How do you get yourself to do boring or tedious tasks?

Before you try to answer these questions, let me tell you about a "shocking" study that was done years ago using college students (from Stanford, not Whitman) as subjects. In this experiment students were given a series of painful electrical shocks and their responses were recorded. Then they asked for volunteer subjects to undergo a second series of shocks of the same intensity. One group was told that if they volunteered they would be paid. The other group was told they could quit or go on—it was up to them. Those who continued because they were given reasons such as money or social pressure suffered the same as they had in the first phase of the experiment. The ones that volunteered to undergo shocks with no justification said that the shocks did not hurt as much as the first time! (From Psychology and Life by Philip Zimbardo.)

One thing we learned from this study was that when you internally justify your reasons for making a personal commitment without obvious rewards, your motivation increases. It's as if the students convinced themselves that it was not going to be so bad, and so it wasn't. But the students that did it for money convinced themselves that it was going to be painful because they had to be bribed to do it; and that became a self-fulfilling prophesy. (The other thing we learned was that it is not ethical to hurt college students for scientific research!)

Performing a tedious, boring, or painful task because of the personal satisfaction you get from committing yourself to it is a powerful motivator. Does that mean you should not reward yourself for a job well done? No. The reward is what you deserve and it can add some much needed fun to your day. However, keep in mind that the thing that might increase your motivation for studying is the satisfaction you get from doing it for yourself!

Here are some other factors that affect motivation:

1. "The finish line" effect: If you can see the end in sight then your motivation to get there increases; but if the task is too long and "never ending" then you might feel like giving up. Break big projects up into manageable pieces and make sure each task has a beginning and an end. If you give yourself a vague assignment like "read biology" or "do economics" instead of giving yourself specific pages to read, it will be harder to get started.

2. The "daylight" factor: We tend to feel more ambitious during the day and less intimidated by problems. Try to schedule tasks that require problem-solving skills during the day.

3. Visualization of the task: It's hard to get yourself to do something if you can't see yourself doing it. Basketball players know that if they can visualize the ball going into the basket it's more likely to happen. Students need to be able to see themselves writing the paper and know what is involved before they can do it.

4. Your health: Diseases both physical and psychological can affect your motivation, but not always the way you might think. The recent winner of the Tour de France, Lance Armstrong, increased his motivation to work out while he was undergoing chemotherapy for cancer!

5. Drugs: Depressants such as alcohol and marijuana are notorious for decreasing motivation in students.