

How to keep motivated during your research degree

Undertaking a research degree can be an isolating experience and sometimes it is easy to lose sight of the end goal and feel that you are not making progress. For a postgraduate student who has just completed undergraduate studies this is often an unexpected feeling.

Many postgraduate researchers assume that doing their research will be an extension of University life and the shock of the change can be startling and unsettling but it is not all bad news. Given that you persevered through your undergraduate studies means you must have been a pretty motivated person and the fact that you proactively sought to undertake further studies and got accepted onto your research degree is further evidence that given the right support you are capable of achieving your end goal. Why do so many people find their research degree hard?

Unlike your degree when you were part of a group of students who all had the same aim and were doing the same work, you really are on your own now. You are the only one who is undertaking your particular research and you are the only one who can do it. You have no peers to measure your progress by and you may feel that letting your supervisors know how you really feel will be seen as a sign of weakness and cause them to start to doubt whether you will ever make it.

It may help to know you are not the first person in the middle of a research degree to feel de-motivated and you will not be the last. Here are some words of wisdom from those who have gone before you!

1. Don't be on your own

You are the only one doing your research degree but you are not the only one doing a research degree. Talk to them. If you don't know anyone there are plenty of ways to meet others like you via courses and workshops tailored for research students. Use communal spaces in your Faculty or the Postgraduate Centre in T^hy Crawshay, where you will meet people who you can speak to and who will understand how you feel. To know you are not the only one with problems can be re-assuring. Often you will be able to give advice to someone else and this can often help you shed light on your own position in a positive way. Also remember that your supervisory team is there to support you – Use them!

2. Remember why you are here

Your end goal of a PhD for example may well seem a distant dream when nothing is really moving forward in terms of your research but it is your end goal that will keep you motivated. Remember why it is important to you, accept that there will be ups and downs on the way to achieving it but you will achieve it with the right support, strength and determination.

3. Do something you feel passionate about

You will hopefully be researching something that really interests you. During the course of your research you can sometimes be presented with a crossroads in terms of which new question you choose to answer. If one area interests you more than another discuss this with your supervisory team – it may be appropriate to follow that path and if you feel strongly about your research area this will help you to keep motivated.

4. Do something else you feel passionate about

This time I mean outside of your work. You need a break. Your research will still be there tomorrow and you will be more effective and fresh if you give up the guilt and go and do something else every so often. Work life balance is important and too much work will leave you feeling negative and despondent and the time you take to do something is not necessarily the most important thing. You don't get extra marks if you spend lots of time doing your work. If you can do something efficiently then do so and enjoy a break without guilt.

5. Copy the successful researchers

And by this I don't mean plagiarise! Think about the researchers around you who are doing well. How do they do it? Working with people who are committed and enthusiastic will help you to understand what makes a successful researcher. Although they may be doing well they will have had to overcome issues. Look at how they coped and copy and adapt their strategies to suit you.

6. Remember that you can do it

Universities want you to get through your research degree. It is in the interest of the University and of your supervisory team. You would not have been accepted on your research degree if they were not convinced of your ability. Remember that, and remember that the University wants to support you.