

Sustaining Motivation

By Marvin Zauderer

[\[PezCyclingNews.com/October 2007\]](http://PezCyclingNews.com/October 2007)

It's the time of year when, after a long season, you may be dragging. Have you been overtraining? Down about your results? Or are you just plain worn out? The mentally fit cyclist notices signs of demotivation early, interprets and responds to the signs effectively, and avoids descending into exhaustion, burnout, or depression.

Last month, continuing our series on Responding to Adversity, I discussed how you can manage and, at times, accelerate your [recovery from injury](#). This month, I explore Sustaining Motivation, the third advanced skill of the mentally fit cyclist.

Motivation has a direction – toward achieving a goal – and an intensity. It's the fuel for everything you do. If things are going well, it's naturally sustained and replenished; you have as much as you need. If forces within and outside you start to drain it, it may be time for you to intervene.

As a cyclist and athlete, you have many possible goals at which to aim your motivation. You might want to climb that mountain in under an hour, improve your endurance, win a race, launch a teammate, complete your first century, or finally beat that guy to the city limit sign.

Of course, the intensity of your motivation will vary. There may be times when you get yourself too "hyped up" for a ride or race. Other times, your intensity may wane too much, and you find yourself without enough of your usual drive. You might then question your goals or training program, skip a workout (or five), or pull out of a race. Sometimes – dare I say it? – you may not want to get on the bike at all. And if you start to force yourself to run on motivational fumes, you can grind yourself into the ground.

To be fair, life has its ebbs and flows, and you're not always going to be able to be as motivated as you'd like. Sometimes you just have to push through. But the more you're able to sustain a level of motivation that's sufficient and healthy *for you*, and the more skill you have at adjusting the direction and intensity of your motivation when one or both are out of whack, the more likely you are to get the most from yourself, enjoy your cycling, and achieve your cycling goals.

One of the many views on motivation, influenced by the work of Stanford psychologist [Albert Bandura](#), is that the interaction of your personality, behavior, and environment affects your motivation, rather than any one factor dominating. So, let's first briefly address personality.

Personality

Speculating on your personality's impact on motivation is certainly beyond the scope of this article (and also impossible to do without us establishing some sort of Vulcan mind-meld. Is Vulcan on the Web yet?). But it may be useful for *you* to hypothesize how your personality can affect your motivation. The better you know yourself, the better you'll be at managing and sustaining your motivation.

For example, you'll recall from Psych 101 that motivation can be *intrinsic* and *extrinsic*. Does your motivation seem to come more from within? Do you seem to be more (or overly?) dependent on external factors (eg. winning)? Or, does neither stand out? Some additional questions that may be helpful are:

- Why do you ride, train, compete?
- Is your focus on the pride you feel in competing, improving, winning ("playing to win") or is your focus on how bad you (may) feel if you "fail" ("playing not to lose")?
- Do you attribute success and failure to factors within or outside of your control? How has that affected your motivation this season?

Personality self-tests such as the [Enneagram](#) and [Myers-Briggs](#) may help as well. Your assignment, should you choose to accept it: How does your "wiring" affect your motivation?

Now, let's look at some potential demotivators in your behavior (including your thinking) and your environment, and some ways you can interpret and respond to them.

Managing Internal Demotivators

Let's start with **fatigue**. It's certainly harder to do anything physical, and to *want* to do anything physical, when you're tired. But why are you tired? What *meaning* are you going to make of your fatigue? How you interpret your fatigue – accurately or inaccurately – can have an enormous impact on your motivation and your next moves.

Are you telling yourself that you'll never be strong enough? That if you miss your next workout it's a disaster? That you're a wimp? [Negative self-talk](#), as I've discussed in a previous article, is one of the most common demotivators. That article has many suggestions for how you can turn negative self-talk around. Here's another: think of a good coach, mentor, parent, boss, or leader you've had. Now try to coach yourself the way s/he did. Be careful how you interpret potential demotivators, give yourself recognition for your progress and accomplishments, and truly take in all the "good stuff" in your cycling. (The new book [Focus on the Good Stuff](#), by former athlete Mike Robbins, has excellent guidance on transforming negative self-talk.)

So, if you simply need some (normal) rest, the way you talk to yourself about your fatigue doesn't have to be demotivating. Exercise physiologist [George Brooks](#) of UC Berkeley [points out](#) that you become stronger in training because you apply the overload principle: habitually overloading your system causes it to respond and adapt. Resting, he shows, is a necessary part of training because adaptations occur during recovery. So, your fatigue may be telling you that you can accelerate your training by resting!

However, if along with decreased motivation you're experiencing such symptoms as longer-term fatigue, higher or lower heart rate than normal for particular workouts, slower recovery than usual, significant changes in sleep patterns, decreased appetite, and unusual irritability, you might be **overtraining**. This can hasten the onset of [depression](#), suppress your immune system, and invite physical illness.

In recovering from overtraining, it's important to investigate what happened. Were you too dependent on training for your sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, or self-esteem? Is your perfectionism or harsh self-coaching running rampant? Did you [choose and manage your goals](#) effectively? (**Poor goal-setting** is another common demotivator, even if it doesn't result in overtraining.) Did you disagree with your coach's program? Or perhaps the rest of life had you so worn down that the "right" training program was really too much for you. Whatever it was, sorting it out – along with keeping your eye out for the early warning signs – is the key to prevention.

Taking a **break from cycling** is sometimes just what the doctor ordered; you come back ready to rock. But at other times, illness, injury, vacation, or competing priorities (eg. a peak time at work) leads to reduced motivation. Why? Well, how harshly do you judge your fitness when you resume riding? [Research shows](#) that detraining begins within a few weeks for the endurance athlete. How afraid are you of relapse or reinjury? (We'll get to anxiety in a moment.) So again, your *attitude* toward the break -- and toward your return -- can have a profound effect on your motivation.

Back to our old nemesis **anxiety** and its siblings: stress, tension, worry, fear, and pressure. It's usually the fuel for negative self-talk. And if you dread training or racing, worry about how you'll be evaluated by yourself or others, fear tricky descents, get overmotivated ("hyped") and don't [manage](#) these and other anxiety-producing experiences effectively, you'll likely be much less interested in cycling. Chronic anxiety is also draining, and so not only can contribute to fatigue, but [burnout](#) as well.

Managing External Demotivators

What about the environment? Well, let's first take that literally: **the weather** can lead to drastically lower motivation for many cyclists. Using the trainer, using videos, changing the workouts you're doing, changing workout partners, cross-

training in the gym, and possibly readjusting your goals can all help to modulate the sometimes crushing reality of constant, cycling-unfriendly weather.

Speaking of the environment, you've heard of toxic waste. What about **toxic people**? Is there a coach, competitor, teammate, family member, or "friend" who seems to be taking the wind out of your sails? If so, you can likely do something about it. You may be able to suspend or end the relationship, take what they're saying (or doing) less personally, use positive self-talk to counteract what they're saying, and surround yourself more frequently with people who are supportive. Your skill with [communication](#) will help you here.

So for you [Princess Bride](#) fans, a veritable Fireswamp of potential demotivators to keep you on your toes (although luckily, no "rodents of unusual size."). Draw on all of your five core mental skills – Goal-Setting, Positive Self-Talk, Managing Emotions, Concentration, and Communication – to see the dangers early, handle them skilfully, and sustain your motivation.

Mark Epstein, in his book [Open to Desire: Embracing a Lust for Life](#), points to a "middle way" of managing motivation: a place somewhere between grasping too frantically for what we desire, and denying ourselves the opportunity to reach. So perhaps sustaining our motivation for cycling comes in part from skillfully managing the free will we've been given: our will to grow and improve, our will to enjoy and be grateful for this part of our lives, our will to finish, our will to win. Which brings to mind some words from the wise Walter Sobchak, the trusted friend and bowling teammate of The Dude in [The Big Lebowski](#). As The Dude completes his frame in an important league game, Walter tells him – quoting Theodor Herzl, as he faithfully points out – "If you will it, it is no dream."



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