

March 18, 2017

15 ways to drown out the negative voice in your head that is keeping you from being successful

By Lydia Belanger

To reach your goals, you have to take risks, develop constructive routines and make time to listen, learn and reflect.

The prospect of making any of the above adjustments to your life is empowering — that is, until your mind starts to wander.

Any time you've thought about making a change or pursuing a passion, you've probably dwelled more on your present state than your potential.

Or once you got started, minor setbacks or flubs have felt like deal-breaking failures. You've beaten yourself up, berated yourself or felt overwhelmed or alone.

Constant reminders of other people's triumphs only make you criticize yourself more. Whether you're scrolling through your Instagram feed or reading a story on Entrepreneur, your kneejerk reaction to someone else's success might be a combination of envy and self-loathing. A cascade of negative thoughts can produce negative outcomes: Inaction. Retreat. Bad habits. By thinking negatively about what you will accomplish, you formulate a self-fulfilling prophecy.

You're not inadequate, and you're not doomed to fail. So next time you're thinking some variation of one of those things, try these 15 strategies to propel yourself out of the funk you're in and proceed with the mission you've set out to achieve.

1. What you tell yourself: "I don't know when or how I'm going to do this."

What you should think or do instead: Set a schedule.

Set aside time to work toward your goal for a given period each day or week. Then stick to your plan. Create a calendar slot for it, and treat it as non-optional, like a job. Eventually, you'll form a new habit.

"Whatever it is, if you want to do it, you need to prioritize it," says Danielle Krysa, author of "Your Inner Critic Is a Big Jerk." "Just like you schedule the rest of your life — work, the gym, pick-up/drop-off of kids, whatever — you have to schedule this in."

2. What you tell yourself: "I'm not in the right environment."

What you should think or do instead: Carve out a corner.

That doubting, destructive voice in your head will find any excuse to impede your progress toward your goal. It's easy to blame your environment, but there are ways to make your circumstances work for you — or create new ones.

"Carve out a little corner of one room and set it up so all your essential supplies are within reach," Krysa writes in her book. "It helps if you surround yourself with some things that inspire you into action."

Once you establish a dedicated place, it will be easier to tune out other aspects of your life while you're working toward your goal. When you're sitting in your corner, surrounded by inspirational objects, or at your new table in your community space, you'll have physically and mentally removed yourself from the place where you also pay bills, eat dinner or help your kids with homework.

3. What you tell yourself: "I'm not in the mood."

What you should think or do instead: "Procrastinate with purpose."

That's what Krysa, who is also an artist, does when she doesn't feel like tackling a big task.

"Maybe that means I go into the studio and I use that hour to tidy everything up. Or maybe I go to the art supply store and stock up on everything I'm low on," Krysa says. "But the interesting thing is, when I do that, I end up getting creatively jazzed up again."

Fill your time with productive tasks that will indirectly lead you toward your goal, she suggests.

4. What you tell yourself: "I don't know what to do next. I feel stuck."

What you should think or do instead: Relax and take your time.

Working toward a goal often involves decision-making, tackling difficult tasks and making tough sacrifices. Often, when faced with these dilemmas, people feel pressure to resolve them quickly, but they aren't always sure about the best course of action.

First, try to relax and take it step by step.

"When you overthink a decision, your instincts aren't involved at all," Heather Havrilesky, author and advice columnist who pens New York magazine's Ask Polly, told Entrepreneur.com. "So the idea is to get into a relaxed space and then feel through your options and your ideas about what you want or what you might enjoy, without getting too attached to what you learn about yourself and your true desires on any given day."

She advises writing down what you like about a potential decision vs. what you dread about it. She also suggests forgiving yourself for not having taken the next step yet. Chances are, you'll be more satisfied with the end result if you give yourself time.

"You don't end up feeling like your decisions are arbitrary when you make them in a calm, relaxed state of mind," Havrilesky says.

5. What you tell yourself: "I will never achieve my goal."

What you should think or do instead: Tell yourself the opposite.

So you've had a setback in your quest to achieve your goal. You know you shouldn't insult yourself, but you can't stop. The criticisms become more and more negative, maybe until you convince yourself of something terribly untrue, such as "you're worthless," or "you'll never achieve your goal."

Your failure to execute on your goals up to this point is not a reflection of your character. The fact that you've formed a goal in the first place indicates that you have an idea of how to better yourself or add something to the world. Now you have to do it, and the biggest obstacle in your way might be yourself and that nagging voice telling you there's something wrong with you or that you can't.

"Every time you have one of those negative thoughts, write it down. Then write the positive opposite, and stick it somewhere where you can see it," Krysa says. "Suddenly you end up surrounded by positive things instead of negative things. It's very Kumbaya, but it really does work."

6. What you tell yourself: "I'm a total mess."

What you should think or do instead: Organize the little details of your life to prime yourself for your big goal.

It's easy to get bogged down by the small things, such as how you look, how clogged your inbox is or how many errands you've been putting off. Disorganization in minor aspects of your personal life could deter you from thinking you're ready to take on something big.

Prepare as much as you can. That way, you can focus on bigger hurdles.

7. What you tell yourself: "My goal is stupid."

What you should think or do instead: Exude confidence bordering on arrogance.

If you're preoccupied with the idea that no one else will be interested in what you're trying to do, you may start trying to convince yourself that you should quit pursuing your goal based on what you're worried others will

think.

Havrilesky says she's made the mistake of beating herself up internally to the point where she couldn't speak concisely or coherently about her ideas for new projects. She's learned from her mistakes and now understands that confidence is everything.

"Take up a little space and own who you are," she says. "Don't worry about what they're thinking."

She also encourages good posture. Havrilesky says that she has found "standing like Wonder Woman" helpful in reinforcing positive self-perception. Despite the fact that science has not proven power posing effective, some people do find that it boosts their confidence.

8. What you tell yourself: "That other person already achieved my goal and made it look so easy. I'll never be as good as them."

What you should think or do instead: Approach the person and ask for advice.

It can be toxic to think about other people's success. You may put them on a pedestal and think they're super-human or free of doubt. Ultimately, you may become wildly jealous of them to the point that you devalue yourself and your potential.

When Krysa found that a writer whose work she followed made her feel this way, she bravely did what so many people never consider: She asked that woman to meet.

"I decided to reach out and go, 'Hey! How do you do what you do? And also I'm super jealous of you,'" Krysa says. "I wanted to say it out loud, and it turns into admiration when you do that."

They met for coffee, and Krysa told her, "I think you're perfect."

The woman burst into laughter. "Are you kidding? I think you're perfect," she replied.

This led the two of them to compare notes.

Krysa walked away with some valuable insight into how this seemingly "perfect" woman achieved her success, a realization that this person was actually human, a self-esteem boost and a new friend to boot.

You shouldn't feel shy about reaching out to someone you feel inferior to. The other person probably feels similar feelings, and you have plenty to teach her, too.

9. What you tell yourself: "Even if I achieve my goal, I'm never going to impress the people I want to impress."

What you should think or do instead: I'm here to connect with others.

Reaching a goal, especially a professional one, is often about more than your ability to excel in your line of work. It also involves a social element, such as networking. This leaves many people convinced that they are going to make a bad impression. Someone will find them too shy, too bossy, too something and not enough something else, and that deficiency will cloud all of their achievements, so they think.

Havrilesky has a solution: "You don't focus on your worst self, and you also don't focus on your fantasy self," she says. "Instead, you think about the people who love you, find you incredibly charming and remember how you act around those people."

Approach meetings and social events with an interest in others rather than a preoccupation with yourself and your own shortcomings.

"They're just regular people who've learned how to play certain roles," Havrilesky says. "Remember that you're not there to impress anyone, even though that's what your bad brain tells you. You're there to connect."

10. What you tell yourself: "It doesn't seem like I'm making any progress toward my goal."

What you should think or do instead: Find someone to hold you accountable.

When you take on a new challenge, it can be discouraging when your life doesn't magically change overnight. You're working so hard, yet you don't feel like you're getting anywhere. You begin to wonder if all of your effort is worth it.

To ensure you don't give up on your goal, establish a support system — one person or a group who will hold you accountable. It could be a family member, it could be Facebook friends or it could be a life coach. You'll feel less alone in your journey, you'll have someone to report to who will make sure you follow through and best of all, you'll have someone who will notice and remind you of how far you've come.

"You'll know that you have someone or a group of someones that are holding you every day in your highest self, to the standard of what that looks like, how that person behaves, how that person treats themselves," says Jessica King, a life coach and senior instructor at Peloton, who works with clients to meet their fitness goals. "Once the awareness around habits and patterns and self-talk is a conversation that's out in the open, it's kind of wild how quickly transformation can happen."

11. What you tell yourself: "That didn't work."

What you should think or do instead: Keep your goal, but find a new means of achieving it.

It's one thing to be oblivious of the subtle progress you're making, it's another thing to know that what you're doing is ineffective. But rather than give up in those instances, try a different approach.

Say you're trying to learn a new skill. For example, you might be trying to learn a new language solely by listening to audio guides during your commute, but you're really not a strong auditory learner. So, you may need to rethink your approach. Perhaps, you learn better with an app or with gamification.

Similarly, King acknowledges that cycling isn't the right form of exercise for everyone trying to achieve a fitness goal. Some prefer yoga, kickboxing or dancing.

"Any sweat is a good sweat," King says. "What's interesting? What's fun?"

12. What you tell yourself: "This goal isn't enough. I should be doing more."

What you should think or do instead: Focus.

Don't overload yourself with to-dos. If you're making a little progress, don't devalue what you've already accomplished by trying to take on a new task or goal. It's likely that you still have work to do on the first one.

"I know something that always came up with us at Roo Outdoor was we have our product, we have our marketing, we have our customers. What's next?" says founder and CEO Mike Kafka. "I always felt like I had to do something more, do something else."

Instead, Kafka recognizes that he should just focus on one thing at a time. The next thing "will come organically when you're not focusing as much energy on it," he says.

13. What you tell yourself: "I'm so overwhelmed."

What you should think or do instead: Journal.

Goal-setting requires focus. You have to stay organized about what you need to do to achieve your goal, but you can't shut the world out, nor can you always resist the temptation to get ahead of yourself. When there are a lot of thoughts swirling around in your head (including negative ones), it can help to write some of them down.

That's what Kafka does every morning. He writes just one or two things most days, whether it's something he wants to work toward or something that's been on his mind. There's no structure or plan for what he writes down — he just records his thoughts.

“It’s helped a lot with clearing my thoughts, refocusing on things that are in the present, things that I want in the future,” Kafka says. “It’s a process of getting out some of the thoughts that I may have had, so I’m not thinking of, ‘What’s the next thing, next thing, next thing?’”

Writing things down also gives him the chance to reflect. He says he goes back and reads his notes bi-monthly to resurface ideas, do follow ups and remember things that were done well.

14. What you tell yourself: “Working toward this goal is taking over my life.”

What you should think or do instead: Take care of yourself.

A lot of people who are working hard toward a particular goal, be it a college degree or a company launch, let their wellness go by the wayside. They romanticize all-nighters and ramen noodles and think that the more they’re sacrificing for their goal, the more likely they are to reach it.

While some people succeed despite neglecting their own health, it is not sustainable for most.

“The way you treat yourself, the way you eat and the way you think are all going to contribute to the end result of whatever you’re creating,” trainer King says.

If you’re not paying attention to your nutrition, it is going to affect your ability to think clearly. Similarly, stagnation in the body correlates with stagnation in the mind — and creativity.

Don’t be afraid to invest some time to burn some energy and take care of yourself by eating right and sleeping.

15. What you tell yourself: “I’m scared to face the changes that achieving my goal will bring.”

What you should think or do instead: It’s not a matter of life or death.

Think of the most intimidating thing you’ve had to face or the most dangerous situation you’ve had to get out of. Now recognize that you made it. You’re here, right now, reading this.

Now think of your goal, and think of which aspect of reaching it is so scary to you. Compare that what you’ve already overcome in your life.

Finally, know that it’s natural to fear new things. Humans are creatures of habit. But humans also have a tendency to beat themselves up. You’ll continue to do that if you don’t take the plunge toward what you’re trying to achieve.

“Sometimes we find ways to prevent ourselves from succeeding, just so we don’t have to live in a new way, among new people, because that sounds scary,” Havrilesky says. “Even if things go badly, I try to laugh about it without internalizing some larger sad message about myself. Everyone screws up here and there. No experience is a verdict.”