

SUMMARY

SMARTER

FASTER

BETTER

CHARLES DUHIGG



Summary of “Smarter, Faster, Better” by Charles Duhigg

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How to supercharge your potential.

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Introduction

Do you ever feel like your to-do lists have to-do lists? Or like you're drowning in all the planners, organizers, and productivity accessories you buy? You buy them under the assumption that if you can just have the right tools in your tool belt, you'll be able to take control of your life and maximize your productivity. Unfortunately, however, you've probably already noticed that it doesn't work that way. Because all of those tools are exactly that: tools. They're helpful things for you to use in the same way that a tire gauge can help you fix a tire. But, just like a tire gauge, they don't have the power to jump up and magically fix your life for you. Your planner will never check off the items on your to-do list while you sleep. No, sadly, these tools will only work for you if you put in the effort yourself. But that's often easier said than done.

In the digital age, our attention spans are shorter than ever and we have more interruptions than ever. Staying on track with a singular task can feel impossible. The same is true with self-incentivizing. Sure, you could tell yourself, "Get this done and then you can have a cupcake," but we all know that you could just eat a cupcake right now whether you get that task done or not. So, how can you do it? How can you make a plan, stick to it, and truly accomplish your goals? Over the course of this summary, we're going to explore the answer to that question.



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How to Keep Your Energy Up

Have you ever ordered a package and eagerly awaited its arrival only to find that your excitement fades when it finally arrives? This emotional experience might feel perplexing, but it's actually pretty easy to explain! That's because you're truly excited about having something to look forward to. In fact, you're often more excited about that than about the physical product you've purchased! The same is often true of projects as well. Whether you've gotten a new promotion at work or you're excited to spearhead a new project, we often start out really excited and find that our excitement dwindles as time goes on. (It usually starts fading once we reach the actual "work" part of the project!)

Once the excitement is gone, it's easy to tire of the project, look for ways to avoid it, and chase the next emotional high. It's therefore unsurprising that this cycle is a huge factor in the development and maintenance of our relationship with procrastination. But now that we know this is what happens, let's find a way to counteract it. The author's research shows that we can actually trick our brains into hacking our happy hormones and enabling us to stay motivated. How does it work? Well, it all starts with a choice. It's no secret that human beings love choices. In fact, allowing your toddler to make small decisions is one of the most common parenting tips around! Even choosing something as simple as what color dress you want to wear today can make a toddler feel proud and powerful. And the same is true for adults! We often connect personal and professional satisfaction with a sense of being in control, so making choices is a fast way to hack our motivation.

For example, if you have a mountain of work to do, try making choices that will help you break that mountain down into small, manageable chunks. For example, let's say that you have to read a 50-page document and then design a powerpoint presentation that reflects the information you've read. If you consider that task in its entirety, it sounds overwhelming! It will take hours! It's enough to make you give up and start binge-watching your

favorite show on Netflix. But what if you broke that big task down into smaller increments and addressed each one at a time? You can start by reframing your task in your mind and thinking, “I have to read this document first.” If you can do this in a relaxing workspace, preferably with a delicious coffee or tea for a dash of yummy motivation, then it’s easier to focus on one task at a time. And once you’ve accomplished that task, reward yourself with a little break and move on to the next one!

Studies show that people think more clearly when they give themselves breaks, so don’t feel like you’re being lazy if you take some time to daydream. Burnout is a very real and very dangerous threat to our mental health and it sets in when we push ourselves too hard for too long. So, take some time to think about nothing or lose yourself in a fantasy of how happy you’ll be when you go on vacation. After your brain has had a chance to recharge, dive back in to another small task! And don’t be afraid to continue breaking that task down into smaller and smaller increments. For example, if thinking about doing an entire powerpoint is overwhelming, just concentrate on doing five slides first. And once you’ve done them, do another five! Just keep breaking that task down until you’ve accomplished your goal.

However, the author acknowledges that some people may have more intense struggles with motivation. Making choices might not be enough to trick your brain into staying on track. So, if that’s the case, that method might not work for you. But there are other things you can try! A sense of purpose is often the most effective motivator. Everyone wants to know that they have a purpose in the world, that their existence is contributing to something bigger and greater. In fact, feeling lost or purposeless in their jobs is one of the main causes of dissatisfaction at work! So, if you want to stay motivated with any given task, think about how that task adds value to your job or your overall purpose in life. For example, maybe completing that task will help someone else. Maybe it will help you to accomplish a personal goal that’s important to you. Answering your emails or finishing a powerpoint might not be the same as curing cancer, but it can still be

meaningful! So, look for the purpose in each task and enjoy that surge of motivation!



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Make SMART Goals

Part of working smarter, better, and faster is implementing a strategy that the author refers to as SMART goals. In this case, SMART is an acronym for creating goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-specific. Although this practice shares some similarities with the motivation hacks we discussed in the first chapter, it's a little different because it's more specific and more intense. Breaking your task down into chunks might be easier when you're working with a powerpoint; it's easy to say, "I'll start by doing the first five slides." But what about when you're working with a bigger goal like losing weight or focusing on some aspect of personal development? A goal like "Lose 100 pounds!" is a pretty tall order and it can be tough to know how to get started. And that's where SMART goals come in. So, here's how you can use that process to accomplish your goals.

Start by making your goal specific. You might think that "lose 100 pounds" is pretty specific, but it's actually quite vague. That's because you haven't specified how you intend to lose that weight or the timeframe in which you hope to do so. By contrast, "exercise every day for a week" is a very specific goal! This statement clearly articulates what you intend to do and when. So, once you've defined your specific goal, think about how you will measure it. In other words, how will you notice real, tangible results? How will you put your goals into practice? Your goal will become measurable when you add a qualifier like, "I will exercise every day for a week by running a mile around the neighborhood before I leave for work." Now that you've put these steps into practice, you can turn your attention to the "A" in SMART: making your goal achievable.

Can you lose 100 pounds if you exercise every day for a week? No. That's not humanly possible. But if you run a mile every day for a week and repeat this practice over the period of several weeks, then it certainly might be! You might also need to add other qualifiers, like supporting your running routine with a healthy diet and a trip to the gym, but these can be added to

the “specific” or “measurable” parts of your SMART goal later on if needed. Once you’ve done that, the next step is being realistic. As we discussed in our analysis of achievable goals, some things-- like losing 100 pounds in a week-- just aren’t possible. So, make sure that you’re not committing to something that you literally can’t do. It’s important to set very realistic goals because, sadly, this is a common problem that many people experience.

All too often, people get caught up in the excitement of setting big, ambitious goals for themselves. They imagine that accomplishing that goal will change their lives and they put all their hopes and dreams into their fantasy of that goal. But if that goal is unrealistic, then it will never be anything more than a fantasy. Because you can run every day for a week and run as hard and long as you want, but you still won’t lose 100 pounds in a week just by running. At the end of the week, you would just be very tired and disappointed that you hadn’t accomplished your goal. But all of that disappointment could have been avoided by simply setting a more realistic goal! So, make sure that your goals are, above all, realistic.

And last but not least, make sure that your goals are time-specific. Setting a deadline for your goals is crucial because if we leave it open-ended, we will naturally procrastinate. It’s only human nature. So, if your goal is to lose 100 pounds, find a realistic time frame that’s somewhere between a week and fifty years from now. (A month might be a better time frame!) Putting a deadline on your goal will help you to work towards it quickly and efficiently and that deadline will provide you with some added motivation. You can even set smaller milestones within your wider timeframe to give you a sense of motivation and accomplishment each time you reach a small milestone! And the best part is that you can implement the SMART strategy with anything from projects at work to personal goals!

However, it’s also important to acknowledge that the best laid plans of mice and men aren’t always foolproof. All of the motivation hacks we’ve discussed so far are simply tools to help you work smarter, better, and faster. But sometimes, no matter how well you implement those tools,

unexpected circumstances are going to pop up. You might suffer a setback or a personal loss that really throws you for a loop. And sometimes, your circumstances aren't even catastrophic. Sometimes, there are just days when you're not really feeling it and when your attention is side-tracked by a million little distractions.

So, when those days hit, what can you do? The author posits that you can maintain your focus by creating mental models. If you ever cherished fond daydreams or told yourself positive stories as a kid, you already have a bit of experience with this! That's because mental models are simply stories that you tell yourself to keep your focus and your motivation up. All it takes is a little bit of imagination, so just imagine how you'll feel when you accomplish your goals or how empowered you'll feel as you knock down every obstacle that stands in your way. These little stories might be small, but they can have a big impact on your mental clarity and motivation! So, whenever you feel your motivation slipping, create a positive mental model to help you stay on track!



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Final Summary

We've all heard the phrase "work smarter, not harder," but sometimes that's more easily said than done. It's tough to conquer procrastination and the lack of motivation. It's tough to press on and get things done. But the author believes that we can implement some simple motivation hacks that will help us play positive tricks on our brains. For example, if a task feels overwhelming and your brain is telling you to give up, break it down into small chunks that feel more manageable! Little tricks like these will trick your brain out of saying, "It's impossible!" and into saying, "I think I can!"

You can also boost your motivation by identifying the purpose in your work and setting SMART goals for yourself. When you create goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-specific, you're literally charting a path to success. You can also use mental models-- positive stories that you tell yourself-- to keep your motivation up and help you stay on the right track. And when you put all of these strategies into practice at the same time, you'll see that it's actually easy to work smarter, better, and faster!



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