



SOURCE: © MARINA LABELLA/IKON IMAGES

How to stay motivated as a researcher

BY **DINSA SACHAN** | 8 DECEMBER 2022

Five tips for keeping going

Research can sometimes move painfully slowly. Experiments may consume an excessive amount of time – and then fail. Academics must toil for many years before they get tenure. ‘You have this grand vision of what you want to happen, but it’s a lot of little steps until you get there,’ says [Angela Brown](#), associate professor of chemical and biomolecular engineering at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, US. ‘There’s also just so much rejection along the way.’

The daily grind can understandably steal your drive to work from time to time. However, it might be time for introspection if you have failed to find your enthusiasm for a long period. Once you have ruled out serious issues, such as mental illness, abuse and family problems, try these expert-backed suggestions to address your motivation problems.

Explore new research areas

After getting tenure, [Paul Craig](#), professor of biochemistry and bioinformatics at the Rochester Institute of Technology in the US, took a year-long sabbatical because he had not been enjoying wet lab research and wanted to explore computational biochemistry – a topic he had been curious about for some time. The leave turned out to be life-changing and he now focuses on creating computer simulations and visualisations of biochemical processes.

Even a short break can allow you to explore new interests. But you need to use this time off wisely. Craig initially wondered if he should use his sabbatical to study a subject that would help his department or something more aligned with his previous work. ‘Then I thought “I should” is not a part of this equation for a sabbatical. What do I want to do? What do I really desire?’ Craig recalls.

Consider a career change

Sometimes, a lack of motivation may signify that you need a new challenge – and that your current career is not fulfilling your creative needs. ‘What excites you will change over time: there’s nothing wrong with that,’ says [Mark Herschberg](#), author of *The Career Toolkit: Essential Skills for Success That No One Taught You*. ‘I don’t know what I’m going to be excited about in 20 years. But it’s reasonable to think it will be different.’

There are ways to ascertain if you need to switch careers. For Brown, it helps to distinguish parts of her job she doesn’t like from those she loves – and then take stock of the big picture. ‘When I think about my job as a whole and talk about it to other people, I see that I still am passionate about it. I enjoy what I do, even if the minutiae of it is not always exactly what I want to do with that particular day,’ she says.

Look beyond research

If research isn’t bringing you joy, then maybe it’s time for you to redirect your focus to other aspects of the profession. For [Julie Pollock](#), associate professor of chemistry at the University of Richmond in the US, teaching and doing research with undergraduates is a significant motivating factor. ‘Even if it’s an experiment that I’ve run a bunch of times before, seeing it for the first time from their eyes makes it fresher for me,’ says Pollock. For her, research is ‘a way to add to their educational experience.’

Celebrate small wins

You may never win a Nobel prize. Few of your papers may appear in top-tier journals. In academia, big wins are rare, which can pull you down. ‘Science is a field in which you see on an everyday basis more failure than success, which is why you should celebrate the small wins,’ says [Sandhya Koushika](#), a neuroscientist at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in India. So you should give yourself a treat if you have just

submitted a paper or mastered a new technique. Koushika adds that it is also important to celebrate others' successes and keep tabs on exciting findings in the scientific world in general. 'Resilience comes because you enjoy the process of doing science and engage with science itself, and not just what's happening in your lab,' she says.

Find accountability groups

Communities on campus can help boost your motivation. Brown is part of one such writing-focused group at her university. Once a week, faculty members from different departments get together on Zoom. The session starts with a check-in, and then participants spend an hour on individual writing projects. During the last five minutes, the participants check in again to discuss their writing, cheer each other on and share suggestions.

'[Writing is] challenging because we write a lot, and it doesn't necessarily lead to anything. There is such a high rate of rejection. So it can be hard to get motivated to do it,' she says. 'Having a group where other people are also doing the same thing helps. It's a little bit of peer pressure and also peer support.'