How to Get Back on Track with Motivation & Habits

It happens to all of us: you are going strong with a project, with learning something new, with a new habit or two … and things go sideways. You get derailed.

This is a critical junction. If you let yourself quit, all your time and effort up until now has been for naught. If you can get back on track, things can be great again.

Most people don't know how to get back on track, and so fail repeatedly. Today I'm going to share a simple method that works for me.

Recently, I've had to use the method because of a few difficulties:

- **A learning project got sidetracked**. For a couple months, I've been focused on learning something new, but I got discouraged because a) my learning efforts got interrupted by travel, which was a bummer, and b) I had a couple of failures that made me feel like quitting. As of a couple of days ago, I was on the brink of quitting altogether.
- **My eating habits have been crap lately**. Well, not complete crap, but crappy enough that I've felt a bit unhealthy. And I haven't been able to get it back on track.
- **My focus hasn't been what it could be lately**. In recent months, I was super focused on my mission, on mindfulness and meditation and helping others. In the last month, that focus hasn't been there, for a variety of reasons. I haven't given up, but have definitely been sidetracked.

Sounds discouraging, right? But not to fear, getting back on track is actually fairly simple.

The Key Principle

Here's the key idea to understand: **getting off track and getting back on track is all about mood**.

When we get off track, it's because things that affect our mood *as it relates to the project or habit*. For example:

1. We get interrupted because of travel, illness, visitors, crises, etc. This interruption makes us feel discouraged. It's not the interruption that is the obstacle, it's the feeling of discouragement that gets in the way.
2. We get tired because of travel, illness, a lack of sleep, etc. … and the tiredness makes us feel unmotivated towards our project or habit. Tiredness is a huge obstacle, because when you're tired, you don't feel motivated, your mood isn't as good, and you just want to comfort yourself with distractions and food (among other things).

3. When things aren't going well, we can get very discouraged — we're not losing weight on our diet, exercise is harder than we fantasized about, language learning is very difficult, etc.
4. When things get busy in our lives, we often have to skip the habit, which can make us feel bad about ourselves.

When our mood, as it relates to the project or habit, is bad … we often feel like quitting, and don't even want to think about the problem. We avoid thinking about it, turn away from it, and seek other comforts.

The Method

So how do you get back on track? Here's the method I use.

1. **Admit there's a problem, and ask a key question**. We often want to ignore the problem, not even think about it. But this only encourages quitting, and doesn't help the problem. All we have to do is simply say, "I'm feeling bad about this. I'm discouraged and thinking about quitting." Then we can ask ourselves, "Do I really want to quit, or is there a good reason to get back on track?"
2. **Take one small, easy step**. If you have good reason to get back on track, don't think about the entire project of getting back on track. That's too much, and can be overwhelming, which means we'll never start. Instead, just think of one thing you can do. For example, if you've fallen off the meditation habit … can you meditate for 30 seconds right now? 10 seconds? If you stopped listening to your language tapes, can you just do 2 minutes of the tapes today? If you stopped doing yoga or bodyweight exercises, can you just do a few minutes right now? It might seem ridiculously easy, but that's exactly what you need to do. Something tiny, anything. This is the key step, so don't take it lightly.
3. **Focus on getting any kind of victories**. If you do 30 seconds, 2 minutes, whatever … you've had success! This is a victory, and a victory changes your mood. If you've been trying to play chess and you've been losing and become very discouraged, then focus on doing some tactics training for one minute. That's a victory! What other kinds of victories can you get? Look for anything: just doing another minute later today or tomorrow morning, doing a little practice on your commute, reading a little about the topic online, anything you can do. Nurture your mood — victories change your mood. Defeats and tiredness can bring it down. So see what you can do to lift your mood up, including talking to someone else about it or making it more social, playing some good upbeat music to make it fun, making some tea or lighting some candles to make it more enjoyable, etc.
4. **Build long-term strength with small steps**. If you build little victories, take small steps, and nurture your mood as in the previous steps … you'll start to have a more

solid habit or motivation for your project. After awhile, you become more robust, so that a little defeat won’t really matter too much. You have room for some tiredness now and then. You’ll be strong and won’t need to worry about all of the little mood changes. But it takes a bunch of small steps and victories to get there. So focus on one small step, one victory, at a time. Don’t worry about the long term, just focus on the short term. And the long-term strength will come.

This isn’t a difficult method — anyone can do it. All it takes is a small admission of struggle, a willingness to ask whether you want to get back on track, and a focus on small steps and victories. That’s doable, and awesome.