

Practice and Rewards

Category: Exercise

written by Olapeju Simoyan | August 1, 2021

I don't particularly enjoy physical exercise, but I do it because it's good for me. The "dopamine rush" that some people associate with exercise is something I have never experienced. Similarly, I don't enjoy the work that goes into learning a new song on the piano, especially when it involves reading sheet music, but I do enjoy the satisfaction that comes from being able to play it smoothly. Even if it's weeks or months later.

A tour guide in Salzburg, Austria, in narrating a story about a famous family of singers, made references to how the children were under constant pressure to "exercise." Given the context of the story, I could tell that she meant "practice." I recently learned that there are several German words that can be translated into the English word "practice," one of them being the act of exercising to perform better. This led me to reflect on the two words and the interconnectedness of some of their meanings.

The word "exercise" typically brings to mind physical exercise like jogging and weightlifting, but there are other forms of exercise, too. We "exercise" our brains with intellectual challenges, and we exercise our vocal cords when singing (practicing a song). I guess the tour guide was right; the singers were exercising their vocal cords!

The concept of delayed gratification plays an important role in our ability to avoid impulsive behaviors and make healthy choices. Practice in the context of perfecting a skill, like regular exercise, is motivated by rewards. Patients in treatment for substance use disorders are exercising self-control as they practice delayed gratification.

On a personal note, the perceived benefit of staying healthy provides the motivation that I need to continue engaging in physical exercise, while the satisfaction of being able to play a musical piece proficiently on the piano motivates me to keep on exercising my fingers and building muscle memory through regular practice.

Keeping the goal in sight, whether it's a healthier body or a polished performance, helps us stay motivated to continue engaging in activities that have long-lasting benefits, even if they do not have a significant impact on the levels of dopamine in our reward centers.

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