

LADIES' **Home Journal**

SPECIAL VALUE ISSUE

MAY 2010

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GO FOR IT!

Are you good at setting goals but bad at follow-through? Time to stop putting your ambitions on hold and start making your dreams happen.

Iwish I had a shiny nickel for every time I have announced, with absolute conviction, that I was ready to sign up for a refresher class in French. I used to be pretty good—not exactly fluent, but proficient enough to carry on a conversation without embarrassing myself. I'd even minored in French in college. Still, on

vacation with my daughter in France six years ago, I was so tongue-tied that I couldn't even ask a restaurant owner if I could use his phone to call a taxi. Ask me today if I've signed up for that French class and the answer would be no. Not yet. But I will . . . I really will.

Many of us drown in a sea of good intentions. Whether the goal is to

spend less, exercise more, stop smoking, start a diet, polish a resumé or return to school, we often know exactly what we want to do. And we know why we should do it. We simply don't. Even worse, we sometimes do precisely the opposite.

Psychologists call this "cognitive dissonance"—the tension you feel when your actions, or inactions, don't

match up with your beliefs or self-image. The rest of us call it waffling. Rationalizing. Procrastinating. The result is the same: You stay gridlocked in a chronic state of dissatisfaction, indecision and guilt.

What's holding you back? It may be that going after a goal—worthy though it may be—is scary. What if you don't make it? How will life change if you do? Or maybe somewhere deep down you feel you don't deserve to succeed or are racked by self-doubt. Perfectionism may also play a role. If you've got that hardworking Type A personality, you're probably afraid of looking foolish. Rather than have others think less of you if you try something and fail, you'll rattle off a list of perfectly plausible excuses to avoid trying at all: "I really want to start painting again, but with the kids out of school for the summer, how can I?"

It doesn't have to be this way. In fact, the expert solutions for achieving your goals may sound so simple it seems they couldn't possibly work. But they are grounded in serious research.

"The most perilous part lies between the time you make a plan in your head and actually take the first step toward following through," says Timothy Pynchl, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Carleton University, in Ottawa. "Once you begin, you'll find that even a small step forward has a spillover effect, ramping up achievement in other areas of your life." But before you can move forward you need to understand what's holding you back.



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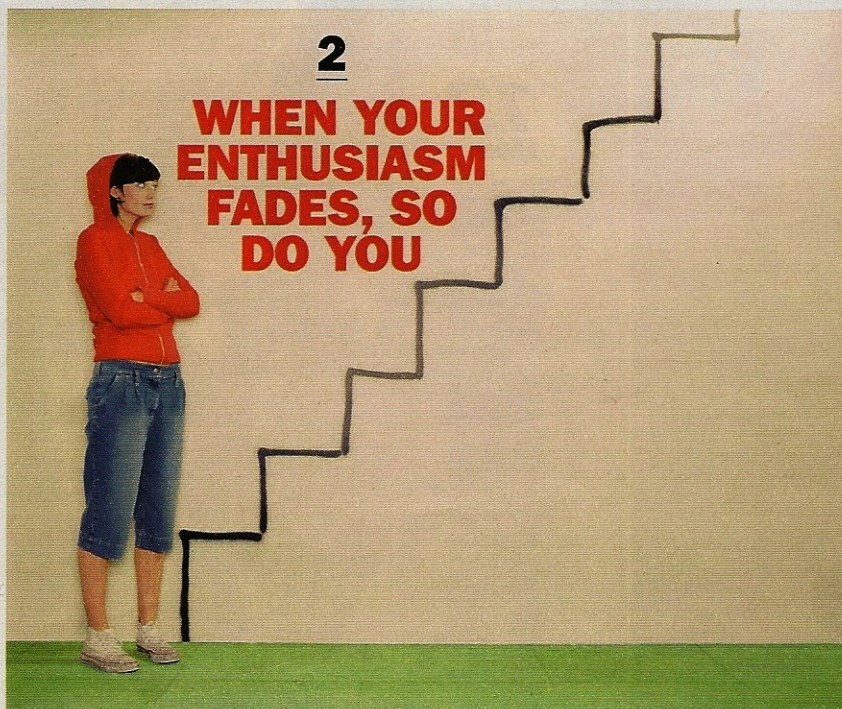
or many women, fear—of change, of failure, of something new—keeps us stuck in jobs we don't like or relationships that no longer work. Change of any kind means facing those fears, so many of us delay taking the first step by telling ourselves that the time is not right.

Take Ellie, a textile designer who has worked for years for a critical, overbearing boss. She loves her job, but he makes her miserable. She knows she deserves a happier situation yet she can't find the time to polish her resumé. "I'm just not in the mood," she says. "But tomorrow I'll make a few calls." Every day there's another perfectly good reason why she just can't get to it.

"Ellie has convinced herself that she'll make more headway in her job hunt if she waits until she's really in the mood to start," says Dr. Pynchl. "It's a common delay tactic. The truth is that no one likes to look for a new job. If you wait until you feel like it, you'll never do it."

Experts in cognitive therapy know that feelings often follow behaviors. "The simple act of trying builds confidence, which in turn fuels motivation and momentum," says Caroline Adams Miller, author of *Creating Your Best Life: The Ultimate Life List Guide*. Whether it's scheduling a doctor's appointment, paying bills on time, reading a certain number of chapters each night or beginning a job hunt, you can kick-start the process by outlining a specific strategy for how, when and where you're going to accomplish a goal. What's more, if you write down your planned strategies, you significantly increase your chance of success, says Dr. Pynchl. "You remove the ambivalence. You're no longer vacillating between 'Will I?' or 'Should I?' Follow through often enough with your plan and you create a new set of behaviors."

Ellie's strategy could be: "When I leave work on Monday I'll print out my resumé and spend 30 minutes every night updating it. Next week I'll make at least two calls to people in my field to either meet for coffee or a drink." She should also tell a trusted friend about her goal, since that pal can keep her accountable and spur her on when she starts to slide.



2

WHEN YOUR ENTHUSIASM FADES, SO DO YOU

Is that treadmill you bought a year ago still sitting idle, despite your wholehearted belief that you would use it regularly? You're not alone. Gillian, a nurse-practitioner, knows she needs to exercise. For the first few weeks after she purchased a top-of-the-line machine, she did. But that was months ago and every night, as she settles into the couch, she's flooded with guilt and wonders why she never does what she tells her own patients to do.

The next time that you're in Gillian's shoes, there are simple ways you can reenergize yourself. Let's say you're driving home from work thinking you should go to the gym but you pull into the drive-through instead. Taking advantage of what researchers call "primes"—which are all the images, words or situations that subconsciously prompt you to think or act in specific ways—can give you just the push you need. Think of primes as cues that influence your thoughts, decisions and actions, even though you're unaware of them, explains Miller.

Athletes use primes all the time: Michael Phelps tattooed Olympic rings on his hip to spur his push for gold. Sports psychologists post words like "success" and "win" in training gyms. Some people have found that changing their cell phone ring or computer screen saver turns a why-should-I-do-this attitude into a why-not-do-it one.

For instance, Gillian might vow to go for a 30-minute run four mornings a week. To get in an exercise mind-set, she should lay out her workout clothes (one prime) so she's ready to go as soon as she wakes up. Placing a pedometer (another prime) on her nightstand so she can strap it on right away gives her another nudge. "People walk 2,000 more steps a day when they use a pedometer," says Miller. "You think: 'Gee, only five more minutes and I'll hit a mile? I can do that!'"

Keeping an exercise log will also boost your confidence and keep you going. Joining a walking club or tennis league can help too because you know that other people are counting on you, which can be a big motivator.

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YOU'RE STYMIED BY SELF-DOUBT

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hough it may sound obvious, experts cite "self-efficacy"—the

deep-seated belief that you can achieve what you set out to do—as one of the make-or-break factors in achieving success. Without self-confidence, it's hard to stay motivated and all too easy to find reasons why you still haven't done what you set out to do.

That's what keeps Kerry stuck. Formerly a fourth grade teacher, she had planned to return to work once her kids left for college, but that was three years ago. Though she talks about it endlessly, whenever she starts to formulate a plan she winds up thinking, "Who am I kidding? I haven't worked for so long, who's going to hire me at my age? Besides, most schools have a hiring freeze now." Disappointed in herself, she fills her days with random errands and activities, all the while worrying about why she's still no closer to figuring out the next chapter in her life.

Like Kerry, many women are gridlocked by self-defeating thoughts. Anything is grist for the mill: Families, marriages, kids, careers, or in Kerry's case, a lack of one. But overthinking can be an endless and crippling exercise. One

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life

FEELING GREAT

thought leads to a cascade of others that reinforce a sense of failure and drain so much of your time and energy that you can barely take action. Obsessing like this also fuels depression, which clouds your ability to think clearly and solve problems.

Kerry needs to be more patient with herself and learn how to brainstorm and evaluate ideas without harping on them. It's hard but not impossible: Overthinkers can do it by recalling, and savoring, past accomplishments and obstacles they overcame. Kerry might say: "I was a good, empathetic teacher . . . I didn't think I could but I connected with the difficult students that other teachers gave up on . . . I really enjoyed working with those kids."

If you find yourself questioning your confidence in your ability to do what it takes to reach a goal, it's also critical to craft a precise timeline of the small but reasonable steps you can take. If you hope to start working again after a prolonged time off, for instance, networking—online or in person—is critical. Call former colleagues who continued in your profession as well as those who used their skills to move into a new area. By attending job fairs or conferences, you'll get a clearer sense of your own interests and abilities, which will help you make better decisions.

4

YOUR TO-DO LIST IS DOING YOU IN

Finally, many women don't realize that they are their own worst enemy, saying yes to everything and everyone. But overcommitting can be an avoidance tactic: When you're so busy doing things for others, you don't have to face the harder task of taking care of yourself.

In a futile effort to accomplish all of her goals, Lisa, an at-home mom, makes lists. She thinks she's superorganized but at the end of her crazy days she's dismayed at how few of the tasks she's actually done—and how little time she has left for herself.

To get moving, Lisa needs to remind herself that there's a right way and a wrong way to make a to-do list. "You might spend a half hour drawing up the list, then rest on your laurels," says Dr. Pynchl. "The list itself becomes the day's achievement—and an excellent way to avoid the work itself."

Simple changes can make the difference. If your list, like Lisa's, is filled with stuff dictated by others, ask: Whose goal is this, anyway? *You* decide what goes on your list—nobody else. "Change your have-to's into want-to's and you'll begin to feel that you actually have a choice in the matter," says UCLA psychiatrist Judith Orloff, M.D., author of *Emotional Freedom*.

Also consider deleting anything that has been on your list forever, suggests Miller. You'd have done it by now if it was really important. (*Au revoir*, French class.) Then, instead of a to-do list you'll have an I-did-it list. And that's a great feeling.

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