

# New method that aims to help people overcome apathy shows promise

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Credit: Lisa Fotios from Pexels

Do you sometimes feel like you just can't be bothered? Would you like to have exercised more, learned a new language or taken more education, but you feel that everything is too much effort?

If so, you probably need more grit and belief in your ability to achieve things. A recent pilot study has sparked hope, and more research will show whether this new method can help more people.

The key is to tap into our hidden innate potential.

"We have developed a method that can help people develop greater persistence and belief in their ability to achieve their goals," says Professor Hermundur Sigmundsson at NTNU's Department of Psychology.

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## **Success depends on many factors**

Professor Sigmundsson has been working for several years to find out what exactly enables people to perform at a high level and how they increase their performance. Many different factors come into play.

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It is important to be really passionate about something, and your attitude really does make a difference. You have to believe that you will achieve your goals, i.e., believe in growth. Your chances of success also increase if most other aspects of your life are generally on track.

However, persistence or "grit" may affect whether you actually get started on something or see it through.

## **'I can do this'**

An initial sample of 38 Norwegian students participated in a pilot trial,

an exploratory study [published](#) in *Brain Sciences* and conducted by Sigmundsson in collaboration with Research Assistant Håvard Hauge.

The researchers first gave the students a questionnaire to see how well they scored on several different factors that play a role in success, and mapped how good the students felt about themselves in general.

The students then completed an [online course](#) lasting 35 to 40 minutes, which is aptly called "I CAN."

Later, the students filled out the same questionnaire again to see if anything had changed.

"After the students had completed the online course, we saw a significant change in grit. It is quite astounding that we can change our attitude in 35–40 minutes," says Professor Sigmundsson.

## **The main features of 'I CAN'**

1. The structure of the brain and our ability to develop the brain are the foundations of learning and development.
2. Effort and long-term dedication to the task are important in gaining better skills and knowledge, and thus to become an expert.
3. You must have the correct attitude. There is no point in putting off starting. You need to realize that more training is needed in order to develop.
4. Persevering over a long period of time requires passion. You have to be passionate about what you want to be good at. Therefore, the pupils are encouraged to spend time on what they like in order to develop a passion.
5. Participants are encouraged to reflect on the learning experience by imagining that they need to give written advice to a fellow

pupil struggling with a difficult topic.

6. The pupils also get a couple of specific examples of how people have managed to develop their brain and achieve outstanding results through purposeful practice.

## **Creating an 'I can' attitude**

For other factors, there was less change, if any. But willingness to make an effort improved.

"We try to create an 'I can' attitude, a belief that they really will succeed. We also want to equip students with strategies that can help them evoke this feeling when they later find themselves in situations where they need it," says Professor Sigmundsson.

Evoking this feeling over and over again can in itself strengthen the networks in the brain needed to develop greater grit over time.

## **Stronger belief increases the chance of finding a passion**

"When you believe that you really can achieve something and are willing to make the necessary effort, this can increase the likelihood of taking on new challenges. It can increase your courage and provide more opportunities to find what you are passionate about, and then help you develop this passion," says Professor Sigmundsson.

Participants learn that success depends on personal effort and practice. Other research has found that purposeful practice is a key factor in managing to achieve something, i.e., that you practice doing exactly what you want to be good at.

## Helping to smooth out differences

Other studies show that when [young people](#) are helped to believe that they can succeed, that they can actually do something, they often do better at school. This is especially true for pupils who come from environments with "lower socioeconomic status," meaning families with low income or low-prestige jobs.

For example, a study from an upper secondary school in Uganda shows that girls in particular benefit from having female role models. These [role models](#) show them that it is actually possible to achieve something difficult. This can both help reduce academic gender differences and help the pupils who struggle the most with [academic work](#).

## Like flipping a switch

"When people develop stronger belief in themselves or 'self-efficacy,' it is almost as if a switch is flipped," says Professor Sigmundsson.

The course and results support previous studies that have shown the effects of short-term interventions, including [a study](#) by David S. Yeager and colleagues published in *Nature* in 2019.

The findings of this pilot project are very promising, but researchers still need to find out more.

They are therefore in the process of carrying out 'I CAN' on a much larger scale, this time with almost 1,000 Year 10 pupils. The results from this latest study are not yet available.

**More information:** Hermundur Sigmundsson et al, I CAN Intervention to Increase Grit and Self-Efficacy: A Pilot Study, *Brain*

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