

Psychologists Find The Difference Between Effective and Ineffective Goals

Red Pill Theory | 14 May, 2016 | by Avery

Are goals a magic pill? A famous, frequently cited study found that the 3% of Harvard students who wrote down their life goals would go on to make 10 times as much money as the other 97% of students who didn't write down their goals.

Sound too good to be true? You're right, that study is just a frequently cited urban legend, it never really happened.¹ But even though that study is an exaggeration, you probably still think that goals help people succeed. Yet, in reality, goals are only useful if you are aware of an important, and rarely talked about nuance. Without this knowledge, goal setting will prepare you for stress instead of happiness, and for failure instead of success.

In psychology, there is an important distinction made between want-to and have-to motivation (sometimes referred to as autonomous and controlled motivation). The often-subtle differences between these two motivational fuels is to blame for the failure of many self-improvement endeavors².

Have-to motivation is the fuel that persuades millions of Americans to wake up early in the morning to get ready for their 9-5. It is the force at work whenever you feel an obligation to do something, whether it be homework, housework, or a blind-date set up by your parents. Have-to motivation causes stress, but we put up with it because, well, we have to.

Want-to motivation on the other hand, is the fuel that leads us to take actions that are inherently enjoyable. Want-to motivation gets us to eat ice-cream, play Mario Kart, and watch Virtual Reality porn. Want-to motivation pulls you towards a behavior, whereas have-to motivation aggressively pushes you into a behavior.

Have-to motivation is effective when the stakes are high (for example, you have to work to avoid homelessness). For personal goals, however, have-to motivation often does more harm than good³. Unfortunately, we often unintentionally use have-to motivation to accomplish personal goals.

Your brain was designed by evolution to conserve energy whenever possible,⁴ therefore any attempt to change your behavior is going to cause a small degree of stress. This stress is made far worse by the way we approach goal setting. We set goals that are exciting: to create a business, to have six-pack abs, or to publish a poem about the flying spaghetti monster. To reach these lofty goals, we commit to a specific daily routine, for example, to get six-pack abs you might commit to an hour of cardio each day.

An hour of cardio is a lot. And that's a problem. Acclaimed psychologist Roy Baumeister succinctly explains why in his book, *Willpower*, "One of the most common reasons for the self-control problem is overconfidence in willpower." We set goals that we know are difficult, but we trust ourselves to push through the challenge, and to later emerge a changed person.

When you set a specific target for your daily routine, say, an hour a day, you have to meet that goal to succeed. You've effectively turned your self-improvement goal into a stressful have-to goal.

We give up on goals because they are too stressful, even though we aren't likely to admit that to ourselves, because, as Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert writes, "Research suggests that people are

typically unaware of the reasons why they are doing what they are doing, but when asked for a reason, they readily supply one.” When we quit a goal, we tell ourselves it’s because the goal, “Isn’t a priority right now,” or, “I don’t have time for this anymore.” Because we make these rationalizations, we keep making the same mistakes each time we set a new goal. Fortunately, the real reason we fail to complete goals is something we can easily control when we are aware of it.

In short, we set daily goals that are too ambitious, and thus they become stressful have-to-goals. Then, we eventually succumb to the distress the have-to goal is causing, and without knowing the real reason why, we give up on the goal.

The solution is frustratingly simple. To break this pattern, choose a long-term goal, like getting six-pack abs. Then, like usual, determine the daily activity that will lead you to accomplish that goal (say, cardio). But don’t require yourself to do any specific amount of exercise per day, you don’t have to work out for an hour, you simply have to work out. If you do a hundred laps around your neighborhood, great. If after fifty feet, you don’t want to run anymore, great. You engage in the goal-directed activity until it starts to feel psychologically stressful. Then you stop.

Although you are still creating an obligation, the scale of the obligation is much smaller, and therefore much less stressful (getting off your ass is less stressful than getting off your ass and then running for an hour). I understand that this might sound too simple, and it likely sounds like it would also hold you back. If you only do the amount of work you want to, how are you going to make real progress?

lazy-treadmill

I’ve had the same thoughts, but interestingly, not setting a specific daily goal leads to more progress. When you don’t feel like you have to do something, you’re going to push yourself harder because you’re engaging in the routine for its own enjoyment. When you feel like you have to do it, you will drain your willpower⁵, and will eventually give up on your pursuit.⁶

I have made the mistake of setting goals that relied on have-to motivation countless times. Each time, I ended up humbling myself. By making the simple shift I’ve outlined in this article, not only will you accomplish far more, but you will enjoy the time you spend pursuing your goals considerably more as well.



I’ve written an ebook, *The Art and Science of Goal Completion*. In it you will find easy-to-use, scientifically proven steps to successfully accomplish any goal you may have.

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