

Goal Achievement

Introduction

One of the central issues identified when looking at the difference between people who achieve their goals and people who do not, is the way they talk to themselves throughout the process.

What stops us from achieving goals?

When we are thinking about starting something new, we start to consider the impact of the goal achievement process on us. That is, the energy and effort we will need to put in to achieve the goal. This leads to us feeling either positively or negatively about the goal achievement process, depending on our personality. This can then influence how successful we are in achieving the goal because it affects our commitment to undertaking the small steps that are necessary to achieve the larger goal.

For instance, if controlling calories is the goal, thinking "*It's only one piece of cake*" may be less useful than thinking "*It's another piece of cake*" or "*That cake means I will be one step further away from my goal*" or even, "*I'll have a piece of fruit first and then see if I still want the cake*".

Tip: Think about the following questions:

- How do you make yourself start something you don't want / like to do?
- How do you keep yourself doing something you don't want / like to do?
- What do you tell yourself that lets you stop doing something you know you should do but don't want to do?

Your answers to these questions can help you to determine the type of goal achievement strategies that have worked for you in the past, as well as things you tend to do that are likely to prevent you from achieving your goals.

Often, part of achieving a goal means that we need to gain new information or become proficient at a new skill. There are **3 common factors** that relate to how we tend to feel when in a learning situation:

1. *Familiarity*

People tend to prefer familiar situations to unfamiliar ones. This is because when confronting unfamiliar situations we have to put in extra effort to think about the new situation, whereas with more familiar tasks we can operate on "auto-pilot". The extra energy required in these situations may be seen in a negative way by some people.

2. *Control*

Feeling that something is impeding your progress (like a lack of skills or knowledge that you have yet to acquire), can result in frustration for some people. It is especially true for people who may not have thought of themselves as "learners" for some time. Frustration can block goal achievement by creating a negative feeling around the tasks that are a necessary part of the process. Feeling negatively about a task means it is less likely to get done!

3. *Sensation-seeking*

How much excitement you like in your life is determined by your personality and can influence the way you go about goal achievement. Sometimes goal achievement requires a steady progression through various stages to reach the ultimate aim. This "slow and steady" approach may feel boring and uninspired to some, resulting in them losing interest before the goal is achieved.

When deciding on a goal it is important to consider some of these factors and to plan strategies designed to help you deal with the negative feelings that might arise. When people don't achieve their goals, chance are it is mainly because they have let the negative feelings determine their behaviour (e.g., not liking getting up at 6am to go to the gym may ultimately defeat you in your quest to become an Olympic athlete). There are many people who have written about different strategies for overcoming the negative thinking habits that can stop you from achieving your goals. Try your local library for some suggested titles.

TIP: Research (Burns, 2006) tells us that successful achievers are:

- Methodical and disciplined
- Logical and analytical
- Flexible
- Persistent and responsible
- Curious and motivated
- Reflective and self-aware
- Have developed effective strategies for finding out information they need to get the job done.

Strategies for overcoming negative thoughts

When you analyse the process that successful goal achievers use, there are two key strategies for initiating and sustaining unpleasant or difficult actions.

1. Just do not think about it or ask yourself if you feel like doing the task. Instead just do it; just start. This blocks the effect of the negative emotions.
2. Generate a positive emotion / feeling by thinking about the benefits of getting it done. Generate a negative feeling by thinking about the consequences of NOT getting it done. Either of these processes will help you redirect your thoughts in ways that are likely to enhance your goal achievement efforts rather than to sabotage them.

Hitting the wall

At around the four week mark goal achievers often "hit the wall". At this point they:

- know more about what they don't know and, therefore, the goal becomes more daunting;
- understand more about what is involved in achieving the goal, such as repetition, activities that might be required that they didn't know they would have to do, people they don't want to deal with, or they have a feeling of "is this all there is to it?"; or,
- they know now how far they have to go to achieve goal - and it seems a lot further than they initially thought!

It is a crucial time when you are most vulnerable to giving up. Now is the time to review the process and implement strategies to assist you to maintain your goal directed focus.

Strategies for overcoming goal paralysis

- Spend a little time on your weakest or least liked activity (not enough to get frustrated, but enough to practice the skill);
- Commit to time periods when you don't judge your own performance (allow yourself to be a "learner"); and,
- Be smart about how you compare your performance to that of other people and choose wisely who you get feedback from.

Creating habits from behaviours

Creating habits of certain activities can be a useful way of helping you to achieve your goals. A habit is a behaviour that is done without thinking or feeling - perhaps similar to brushing your teeth in the morning - it's something you just go and do without making too many conscious decisions about it.

The best activities to turn into habits are ones which need to happen frequently or over a long period of time. Turning them into habits can help you to remain motivated by reducing the amount of energy it takes to make sure the activity is done and done regularly.

Effective ways of turning a behaviour or activity into a habit involve:

- Repetition - doing something over and over can eventually make the activity automatic
- Outside motivators - using other things or people to help you get started (e.g., coaches; reminders; alarms; promises)
- "Just start" - one of the more successful strategies is to deny yourself the opportunity to think about whether or not you will start the activity and to just start. Sometimes it can be beneficial to say to yourself that you will do 10 minutes per day on a particular task, working towards achieving the goal gradually in small steps.

With all of these approaches the primary aim is to neutralise the emotion / feeling associated with the activity you don't like.

Remember:

- Every big achievement started with one very small action.
- Every big achievement is nothing more than a whole stack of very small actions.

Managing long term goals

Sometimes it is useful to ask ourselves whether we are choosing the activities we do with the thought that they may lead to a long term goal, or are we only doing activities that are chosen for us by others?

Try this exercise:

If you had a dream and in that dream you were 50 years older than you are today, when you looked back at your life until today what events, people and things would you hope to find along that timeline?

- Begin to create a list on paper or in your mind of the people and events you want to one day look back on.
- Pick one of these events and ask: What small action can you take today to ensure that indeed you do find one of those events in your life?


It has been consistently shown that people are more likely to achieve their goals if they take the time to write them down and review them periodically.


To get the goal achievement process started, for each of your goals ask:

- When do I want it to be achieved?
- When do I need to begin to take action?
- When do I need to start thinking about it?

Now.... just start!!!!

Further resources

Much of this information has been inspired from the research conducted by Stephanie Burns in the field of leadership, training and goal achievement. Additional relevant articles concerning motivation and achievement of goals can be found at her website ( <http://www.stephanieburns.com>).

Your local library is usually a good resource for general information on goal setting and goal achievement. For more specific assistance please contact the local Psychology Support Section or Defence Community Organisation ( <http://www.defence.gov.au/dco/>).