

Goal Setting: Psychologically Formulating and Achieving a Desirable Future

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Abstract

Discussed herein is a short overview of goal formulation as well as an outline of various psychological processes that may assist one in their journey toward goal achievement including initial goal formulation, pathway thinking, goal feedback loops and cognitive envisioning. As goal setting is a cognitive representation of a desirable future outcome, both achieving and failing to achieve a goal will have psychophysiological effects. The neurotransmitter dopamine is identified as a positive goal-pursuing neurotransmitter that is released when positive progress is made towards one's goal. Universally applicable, setting a goal can be implemented in various domains such as psychotherapy, academia, business, relationships, and weight management. Potential hinderances to achieving goals are outlined, along with ways in which one may be able to protect themselves from goal achievement failure. While setting a goal may initially be considered as a simple cognitive practice, to achieve a set goal, one must spend the necessary resources and ensure that the behaviors executed are aligned toward goal achievement.

Keywords: psychology, goal formulation, goal setting, mental health, cognitive, goal achievement, pathway thinking, Christianity and mental health

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Goal setting is a psychological process that may be utilized to assist one in achieving a desirable outcome in any domain of life. As simple as goal setting may seem, it is a multifaceted psychological process that starts with a cognitive representation of a desirable future state (Avishai, Conner, & Sheeran, 2019). Merely fantasizing about the completion of a goal may become a hinderance in goal achievement (Avishai et al., 2019). To combat against hinderances to goal achievement, psychological processes such as “cognitive envisioning” and “pathway thinking” should be considered (Avishai et al., 2019). If one never spends the time and cognitive effort necessary to develop a roadmap towards goal achievement, one may experience adverse psychophysiological impacts. Goal setting and goal achievement are not passive practices and are perhaps best approached with a helping mentor, friend, pastor, or therapist.

Goals: What Are They and What Neurobiological Effects They Have

Goals and goal setting are more psychological than one may initially perceive. As defined by Avishai et al. (2019), goals are cognitive representations of a futuristic desired outcome in a specified domain of life. Goals allow one to psychologically manifest multiple cognitive representations of future conditions. Volkova, Spiridonov, Lavrova, Kuminskaya, Markova, and Danina (2019) state that goals are a vital element to any given activity. This is further supported by literature suggesting that pursuing one’s personal goals is important to one’s psychophysiological well-being (Hadley, & MacLeod, 2010; Peterson, & Mar, 2010). Peterson and Mar (2010) found that individuals who were part of a cohort that spent cognitive effort writing and thinking through their ideal futures had less visits to medical professionals compared to the control group after a five month follow up. Additionally, the literature states that while one is making progress towards a goal, the body responses neurobiologically by releasing dopamine

which is a neurotransmitter well-known for its contribution to positive emotions (Peterson, & Mar, 2010). As Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore (2010) explain, individuals who experience positive progressive goal fulfillment will likely initiate a positive feedback loop between goal commitment and self-efficacy. This feedback loop continuously strengthens both self-efficacy and goal commitment resulting in the mobilization of stronger psychological self-regulating processes that help facilitate subsequent goal attainment. Goals can be utilized across various professions and practices such as, but not limited to, organizational planning, psychotherapy, sports, health behaviors and educational performance (Morisano, et al., 2010; Volkova et al., 2019; Avishai et al., 2019; Peterson, & Mar, 2010).

Goal Formulation: Not a Passive Practice

Goal formulation is a conscious cognitive representation of a desirable future state and is by no means a passive practice (Avishai et al., 2019). Psychological goal formulation is an active practice highly demanding of one's cognitive resources and time. Setting aside time to allow oneself to psychologically formulate a desirable future state for a given domain is necessary for the construction of any goal. There are additional goal setting elements essential for goal formulation such as differentiating between an unrealistic and realistic goals. In their research on goal setting within the domain of psychotherapy, Volkova et al (2019) found that individuals occasionally tend to construct unrealistic goals which may lead to negative goal achievement outcomes. Negative impacts of unrealistic goal setting were also identified by Brusso, Orvis, Bauer, and Tekleab (2012), stating that unrealistic goals adversely affected future goal performance.

Aside from constructing desirable future states that are realistic in nature, setting goals also involves psychologically mapping the incremental, intentional behaviors relevant to the

desirable goal. As Hvid and Engell (2013) discuss, psychologically formulating a goal helps lead one in a specific direction. Starting with the formulation of a desirable future state (goal) allows one to quickly process through actions that may bring them closer to achievement of that goal (Hvid, & Engell, 2013). The Word of God also supports the idea of approaching goal setting with psychological precision to the degree one is able to write out their goal with clarity as they strive to achieve it (Habakkuk 2:2, AMPC). When a clear goal has been constructed, individuals can focus more precisely on behaviors that are relevant to goal achievement while avoiding the mistake of focusing on behaviors irrelevant to their goal (Morisano, et al., 2010; Hvid, & Engell, 2013). Provided that positive, progressive goal achievement impacts individuals neuropsychologically (Peterson, & Mar, 2010), spending psychophysiological resources on behaviors that are goal-irrelevant could have adverse effects on an individual. As with the positive feedback loop between goal commitment and self-efficacy (Morisano et al., 2010), one may experience hopelessness if they perceive their goal as unattainable (Hadley, & MacLeod, 2010). Based on the literature, goal formulation and achievement are complex dynamic processes that involve mapping out incremental behaviors that align with making progress towards the goal while attempting to avoid behaviors that are goal irrelevant.

Safeguarding Goal Achievement

Goals are meant to be achieved and attainable, not something one forever strives to accomplish or a lofty fantasy in one's imagination. Because psychological goal formulation effects individuals neuropsychologically (Hadley, & MacLeod, 2010; Peterson, & Mar, 2010), it may be best to approach goals with a determination of completing said goals. As mentioned previously, a goal should be formulated around a clear purpose, it should be realistic, and it should have, at the least, a tentative psychological mapping of incremental behaviors that are

relevant towards goal achievement. Having a clear, specific, realistic, purposeful goal with potential goal-relevant behaviors psychologically mapped out allows one to focus their limited time and resources on executing the necessary relevant behaviors that align with achieving that goal (Morisano, et al., 2010; Hvid, & Engell, 2013). Avishai et al. (2019) state that those who practice cognitive envisioning, specifically related to relevant behaviors towards a goal, may experience an increase in motivation towards actions that align with goal achievement. Additionally, cognitive envisioning allows one to psychologically map potential obstacles to exhibiting behaviors that achieve goal progression (Avishai et al., 2019). This may assist individuals to focus on goal realism rather than wasting valuable cognitive resources on fantasizing.

Fantasizing is closely related to the practice of cognitive envisioning. Fantasizing superficially provides utility in goal achievement, however, it can lead to misplaced focus on action *desirability* instead of action *feasibility*. As one cognitively focuses on the desirability, and not the feasibility, of goal-relevant behaviors, one may experience negative behavioral changes towards goal-achievement (Avishai et al., 2019). Focusing on action feasibility may better prepare one for future realistic, relevant behaviors that align to goal achievement (Avishai et al., 2019). Avishai and colleagues (2019) use the terminology “pathway thinking” to explain this practice. Pathway thinking allows one to think through and work through the various challenges that may manifest as one is progressing towards a goal (Avishai et al., 2019). During their study, Avishai et al. (2019) found that as individuals practiced pathway thinking, their goals became more realistic. One may infer, then, that pathway thinking may be utilized as a psychological mechanism that could protect one from fantasizing and setting unrealistic goals.

An additional item relevant to goal achievement is not setting goals that are too lofty or too difficult to achieve (Brusso et al., 2012). Brusso and colleagues (2012) explain that when too difficult of a goal is set, the individual will most likely fail at achieving the goal leading to the manifestation of a “large goal-performance discrepancy”. Large goal performance discrepancies were found to adversely impact future behaviors towards goal achievement (Brusso et al., 2012). Brusso et al. (2012) suggest that individuals should set smaller goals as opposed to the large, difficult goals to avoid goal-performance discrepancy. Peterson and Mar (2010) discuss a similar approach by stating that setting nearer or proximal goals is the optimal path to goal achievement. Both Brusso et al. (2012) and Peterson and Mar (2010) seem to align with the idea of pathway thinking and cognitive envisioning as discussed by Avishai et al. (2019). Brusso et al. (2012) also outline the importance of receiving feedback on goal achievement progression. This suggests that to receive feedback, one would need to set up mechanisms to track goal progress. Although the idea of measuring one’s progress towards a goal is a simple idea to comprehend, attempting to cognitively construct what to measure and how to measure can be difficult. Working with a professional, counselor, pastor or mentor may prove useful when approaching goal formulation, tracking, and fulfillment.

Conclusion

Goal setting is an important psychological process which can be utilized across various domains such as sports, academics, business, organizational planning, and psychotherapy. Profoundly psychological, goal setting requires a large amount of one’s cognitive resources and time and should not be approached as a passive practice. The formulation of a goal can be viewed as psychologically developing a future state or image that one desires to achieve. Although constructing a goal is achievable for most individuals, completing said goal can be

much more difficult. This involves aligning one's behaviors towards goal achievement.

Psychological processes such as cognitive envisioning, proximal goal formulation and pathway thinking may prove useful in goal pursuit. Processes that may provide utility in goal achievement are measuring the progress and allowing a third party to provide objective goal progression feedback.

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