

“THE ROAD TO HELL”: PROBLEMS TRANSLATING INTENTIONS INTO ACTION AND THE BENEFITS OF IF-THEN PLANS

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Goal theories, health behavior models, and accounts of attitude-behavior relations converge on the idea that forming a goal intention is the key act of willing that promotes goal attainment. Goal intentions are instructions that people give themselves to perform particular behaviors or to achieve certain desired outcomes (Triandis, 1980) and characteristically are measured by items of the form, “I intend to achieve X!” A meta-analysis of intention change interventions, however, suggested that the “gap” between intention and action is substantial (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). Experiments that succeeding in changing goal intentions among treatment versus control conditions ($d = .66$) engendered only small-to-medium changes in subsequent behavior ($d = .36$). Thus, it appears that for many goal domains—and, perhaps, nutrition goals in particular—the proverbial road to hell indeed seems to be paved with “good” intentions.

Why do people often fail to translate goal intentions into goal attainment? Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) suggested that merely forming the intention to pursue a particular goal is only the first step on the path to goal attainment. To reach the goal the person also must strive effectively for the goal by managing various self-regulatory problems that can arise en route. Three problems that seem to offer the greatest challenges to successful goal striving are *failing to get started*, *getting derailed*, and *overextending oneself*.

Failing to get started with goal striving involves problems both in remembering to act (e.g., to purchase the ingredients for a low-fat meal) and seizing an opportune moment to act. When faced with small windows of opportunity or when there are multiple routes to goal attainment, people may fail to initiate goal striving because they do not notice that a good time to get started has arrived or because they are unsure about how they should act when the opportunity presents itself (e.g., what low-fat dish should I order from the menu?). People also may fail to get started with goal-directed behaviors because they have “second thoughts” at the critical moment (e.g., when they confront a delicious curry on the lunch menu).

Even assuming that the person is successful in initiating goal striving, repeated and persistent striving may be needed to accomplish important goals such as eating a healthy diet (Rothman, Baldwin, & Hertel, 2004). Problems that can send people off track include: spontaneous attention to distractions or temptations, falling prey to bad habits, unwanted social pressure, and becoming overwhelmed by negative self-states such as distress. Metcalfe and Michel’s (1999) hot/cool-system analysis of willpower indicates how attending to “hot” characteristics of a tempting stimulus undermines self-control. Wood and Neal’s (2007) research shows that behaviors that have been repeatedly and consistently performed in the same context are directly cued by relevant contextual cues such that “bad” habits often override “good” intentions. Studies of alcohol consumption and safer sex have indicated how the implicit or explicit expectations of significant others need to be negotiated successfully to realize health-goal intentions, while Tice, Bratslavsky, and Baumeister (2001) have shown that when people are in a bad mood, they prioritize mood repair over other goals and thus are liable to engage in behaviors assumed to offer solace in the short-term (e.g., consuming high-calorie foods).

Successful initiation, continuation, and even completion of striving for a particular goal may count for little, however, if the person becomes overextended such that subsequent goal striving is compromised (e.g., if refraining from the desired high-fat lunch option engenders over-indulgence at dinner-time). Action control by goal intentions is vulnerable to such overextension as has been demonstrated by the phenomena of ego-depletion (Baumeister) and ironic effects of mental control (Wegner). Clearly, it would be helpful if some self-regulatory tool was available that could help people to initiate goal striving, keep goal striving on track, and conserve capability for future goal pursuit.

Forming if-then plans or *implementation intentions* (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 1999) constitutes one such self-regulatory tool. Whereas goal intentions specify what one wants to do or achieve (i.e., “I intend to achieve X!”), implementation intentions specify the behavior that one will perform in the service of goal attainment, and the situational context in which one will enact it in a contingent format (i.e., “If situation Y occurs, then I will initiate behavior Z to reach goal X!”). To form an implementation intention, the person specifies a response that is instrumental for goal attainment in the then-part of the plan (e.g., having a salad), specifies a suitable occasion to initiate that response in the if-part of the plan (e.g., ordering lunch), and mentally links the specified opportunity and response (“If the waiter is taking my lunchtime order, then I order the salad!”).

Because forming an implementation intention implies the selection of a critical future situation (i.e., a suitable opportunity), the mental representation of this situation becomes highly activated, and hence more accessible. This, in turn, makes it likely that people will identify and take notice of their opportunity to act when they subsequently encounter it (e.g., Webb & Sheeran, 2004). Implementation intention formation also forges a strong association between the specified opportunity and the specified response (Webb & Sheeran, 2007). The idea is that people do not have to deliberate about when and how they should act when they have formed an implementation intention unlike people who have formed mere goal intentions. Thus, people who form if-then plans act quickly and effortlessly (automatically) when they encounter the specified opportunity (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Fashioning an if-then plan *strategically automates* goal striving because people delegate control of goal-directed behaviors to pre-selected situational cues with the express purpose of reaching their goals—automatic action initiation originates in an act of will (if-then planning).

Implementation intention formation has proved beneficial for initiating goal striving, staying on track, and conserving capability for future goal pursuit. For instance, participants who formed if-then plans initiated daily activities sooner after surgery, and were more likely to take pills, attend appointments for cervical cancer screening, and exercise compared to controls (review by Sheeran, Webb, & Gollwitzer, 2006). Implementation intention formation also reduced intake of snack food, increased sports performance, and prevented feelings of shame from derailing keeping one’s appointment for psychotherapy (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008; Sheeran, Aubrey, & Kellett, 2007). Action control by implementation intentions both averted and overcame the effects of ego-depletion (Webb & Sheeran, 2003) and meant that people strived tenaciously to reach their goals even when their path was blocked (Martijn et al., in press). A meta-analysis of 94 studies found that forming if-then plans had an effect of medium-to-large magnitude on goal attainment ($d = .65$; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

Although the strategy of forming implementation intentions has proved effective in promoting the attainment of a variety of goals, few implementation intention studies have specifically concerned nutrition and weight control. Considerable work needs to be done to identify (a) what are biggest or most prevalent self-regulatory problems that prevent attainment of nutrition goals, (b) what sorts of opportunities and responses it would be best to specify in respective implementation intentions to manage these problems effectively, and (c) how if-then planning interventions might optimally be delivered to different target populations. Thus, the application of implementation intention research to the field of nutrition and dietary change may offer intriguing challenges as well as interesting opportunities.

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