



Staying on track: Planned goal striving is protected from disruptive internal states

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ABSTRACT

Past implementation intention research focused on shielding goal striving from disruptive internal states (e.g., being anxious) by forming if–then plans that link these very states to instrumental coping responses. In the present line of research, we investigated whether planning out goal striving by means of if–then plans specifying opportunities to initiate goal-directed responses also protects goal striving from the negative impact of disruptive internal states. Indeed, in the face of disruptive internal states, participants who had been asked to form implementation intentions that targeted opportunities for initiating goal-directed responses outperformed participants with a mere goal intention to do well on a focal task goal. Actually, implementation intention participants performed as well as control participants who were not burdened by disruptive internal states such as being in a certain mood (Study 1), ego-depleted (Study 2), or self-definitionally incomplete (Study 3). Results are discussed by pointing to the importance of hypo-egoic self-regulation.

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Introduction

Traditional models of goal pursuit posit that goals fashioned from feasibility and desirability considerations satisfactorily account for the intensity of goal striving (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Heckhausen, 1991). However, empirical evidence suggests that this effect is moderate at best. A recent meta-analysis indicates that there is a substantial gap between people's goals and their attainment (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). This implies that holding a strong goal ("I intend to reach Z1") does not guarantee goal achievement as people may fail to effectively deal with self-regulatory problems associated with translating a goal into its attainment.

Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) differentiated various self-regulatory problems of effective goal striving. For instance, there is the issue of getting started. Often opportunities to act are not used because one is dealing with many things at once or preoccupied with competing tasks; in addition, such opportunities often present themselves only briefly, thus requiring swift action. Also, people may fail to initiate goal-directed action because they need to overcome an initial reluctance to act (e.g., when it comes to vigorous exercising in order to meet the goal of physical fitness). But even if a person has successfully initiated goal striving, a successful ending is yet to be achieved as people

need to stay on track. Certain internal and external conditions are not conducive to shielding one's started goal striving but could actually derail it. Thus people need to protect the ongoing goal striving from attending and responding to distractions from inside and outside the person.

Successfully shielding one's goal striving implies staying on track by abstaining from performing antagonistic attention and behavioral responses to these events. So far, research on controlling such responses for the purpose of shielding goal striving has analyzed disruptions that are anticipated by the individual. For instance, Patterson and Mischel (1975) warned children participants that their performance of a rather tedious task (i.e., putting pegs in a peg board) might be disrupted by seductive comments of a Clown Box to stop their work, walk over to him, and talk to him. Children thus had a chance to make plans on how to deal with Mr. Clown Box once he spoke up (e.g., ignoring him or increasing their effort on the task at hand).

In the present paper, we analyze a different way of protecting an ongoing goal striving from getting derailed. We argue that spelling out goal striving in advance by using if–then plans that specify opportunities to act will stabilize this striving to such a degree that distracting stimuli can no longer intrude. When using this strategy people do not have to anticipate potential disruptions, nor do they need to know how these are to be dealt with most effectively. After all, this strategy does not focus on coping with distractions; rather, it focuses on laying down the details of one's goal striving by linking opportunities to act towards the goal with instrumental goal-directed responses.

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Implementation intentions: a strategic attempt to install automatic self-regulation

Implementation intentions are if-then plans formed in the service of goal intentions (e.g., “I want to exercise more!”; Gollwitzer, 1993, 1999). Such plans create a strong link between a critical cue (e.g., “When I get out of bed in the morning, . . .”) and a goal-directed behavior (e.g., “. . ., then I will put on my running shoes!”) by one single conscious act of will. Studies in different domains (e.g., academic, health, interpersonal) have shown that goal attainment is fostered by implementation intentions (for summaries, see Achtziger & Gollwitzer, 2010; Gollwitzer, Gawrilow, & Oettingen, 2010; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). For example, implementation intentions support goal attainment even when goal-directed behavior is inconvenient (e.g., Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997) or unpleasant (e.g., Orbell & Sheeran, 2000). These effects of implementation intentions are explained by the fact that implementation intentions delegate the control of goal-directed behavior to critical cues. Accordingly, implementation intentions turn the control of goal-directed responses from conscious and effortful top-down control by the goal intention into a direct, bottom-up stimulus control.

The effects of implementation intentions are based on the following processes (see Gollwitzer, 1993, 1999). One process concerns the specified critical cue (i.e., the if-component); forming an implementation intention leads to an increased activation of the mental representation of the critical cue. Thus the critical cue is more easily detected, readily attended to, and successfully remembered (e.g., Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & Midden, 1999; Parks-Stamm, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2007; Webb & Sheeran, 2004, 2006). A further process concerns the goal-directed behavior that is linked to the critical cue in the then-component. Automatic initiation of the goal-directed behavior occurs once the critical cue is encountered, as evidenced by immediate and efficient action initiation that needs no further conscious intent (e.g., Bayer, Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Moskowitz, 2009; Brandstätter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001; Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997).

Implementation intention research has not only studied getting started with goal striving but also the shielding of an ongoing goal striving (Gollwitzer, Bayer, & McCulloch, 2005). So far, implementation intention research on goal shielding however has mostly followed Patterson and Mischel's (1975) lead; it studied the suppression of unwanted attention responses to distractors (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, 2008; Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998). Gollwitzer and Schaal (1998) asked participants to perform arithmetic problems for a period of 15 min while being distracted by interspersed exciting film clips. Participants who had formed implementation intentions that specified the onset of a film clip in the if-component (i.e., “As soon as I see moving pictures or hear some sound, . . .”) and a coping response in the then-component (i.e., “. . ., then I will ignore them!” or “. . ., then I will concentrate on the math problems!”) performed better on the math problems than mere goal intention participants who only set themselves the goal to not get distracted by the film clips.

Recently, Achtziger et al. (2008) analyzed the shielding of goal striving from anticipated critical internal states. In Study 1, college students with the goal to suppress fast food consumption were enrolled in a study on eating fewer snacks. As compared to a no-treatment control condition, implementation intention participants who prepared themselves against eating high fat snack food by planning out how to suppress their craving-related thoughts did indeed reduce their snack food consumption in the following week. In Study 2, participants were tennis players who prepared themselves for an upcoming competitive match. As compared to a no-treatment control group, goal intention participants were asked to form the goal to perform as well as possible in this match.

Implementation intention participants additionally were asked to form four if-then plans on their own, each of the if-then plans specifying an anticipated disruptive internal state (e.g., being anxious) that had to be linked to a preferred coping response (e.g., increasing concentration). Only implementation intention participants evidenced better physical fitness and performance compared to prior matches as rated by their coaches and team-mates.

Note that the experimental paradigms used by Gollwitzer and Schaal (1998) and Achtziger et al. (2008) both put participants in a position to anticipate potential disruptions to their goal striving. In the Gollwitzer and Schaal studies, the experimenter told the participants about the upcoming external distractions; in the Achtziger et al. studies, the participants had to recall exactly those critical internal states that prevented them from meeting their goals in the past. The participants thus could use the anticipated distractions to specify the if-components of their implementation intentions and link them to coping responses in the then-components.

The present research

We wanted to explore whether implementation intentions can shield a focal goal striving from disruptions even if these plans do not specify how to cope with upcoming distracting stimuli, but instead how to use opportunities to act towards attaining the focal goal. The latter implementation intentions thus specify a suitable opportunity to act towards the focal goal in the if-component. Furthermore, in the then-component they describe a response that is instrumental to goal attainment given the presence of the specified opportunity. We postulated that such implementation intentions effectively counteract the negative impact of distractions on focal goal strivings, and we tested this hypothesis by analyzing various internal states that are known to be disruptive to meeting these goals. Specifically, we studied handicapped goal striving stemming from disruptive internal states of an affective (mood, Study 1), volitional (ego-depleted, Study 2), and motivational (an incomplete identity, Study 3) nature. Given the assumption that by forming implementation intentions a person's action control is delegated to specified cues (i.e., anticipated opportunities to act towards the respective goal), potentially disruptive internal states should no longer handicap goal striving.

In the present research, the experimental designs of the three studies conducted all contained control conditions so that we could check whether the induced critical internal state did indeed hamper goal attainment (i.e., qualifies as disruptive). Also, we established goal intention and implementation intention conditions for those participants who were induced into disruptive internal states in order to test whether adding implementation intentions prevents impaired performance. In Study 1, it was assessed whether implementation intentions can ameliorate the enhanced stereotyping in judging others that is induced by being in a positive mood. In Study 2, we tested whether the negative effect of reduced self-regulatory capacity (i.e., ego depletion) on academic task performance vanishes when implementation intentions have been formed. In Study 3, we analyzed whether implementation intentions can weaken the negative effect of self-definitional incompleteness on interacting with others in a sensitive, perspective taking manner.

Study 1: preventing stereotypical judgments induced by positive mood

Theories on mood and cognition (for an overview see Martin & Clore, 2001) postulate that being in a positive mood favors the use

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