Hacks for Effectively Setting and Reaching Goals

Use neuroscience for goal attainment.

BY KENNETH M. NOWACK

Most of us are good at setting goals but not nearly as successful at attaining them. University of Oregon professor Elliot Berkman suggests that successful habit and behavior change is heavily influenced by two separate areas of the brain that facilitate getting started on goal setting: the will and the way.

The will, or default-mode brain network, relates to emotional and motivational aspects of behavior change. The way—the executive function or task-positive brain network—refers more to creating a specific plan, rewarding goal accomplishments, and evaluating our progress.

Let's look at 10 neuroscience-based facts and hacks guaranteed to enhance your motivation to get going (the will) and to guide you (the way) toward successful habit and behavior change.

Facts and hacks about goal setting

Think of any new behavior you want to change—for example, becoming a better listener or being more participative in meetings. The science of getting the will going to initiate new goals reveals five behaviors we should adopt.

Focus on goals versus chores. Intrinsic motives predict goal success more than extrinsic ones. Your ideal self is the emotional driver for intentional change. Extrinsic motivators in the form of rewards and punishment are short-lived and almost always elicit minimum engagement.

From a neuroscience perspective, loss aversion is a stronger external motivator than reward. In their study, Mitesh S. Patel and others at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine attempted to get people to take 7,000 steps a day. Participants who received a monetary reward for achieving the goal were 50 percent less successful than those who had the same amount of money taken away each day.

Hack: Think of goal setting as having five options (stop doing something, start doing something, do less, do more, or do differently) and whether the desire is to do this once (run a marathon), sometimes, or all the time as

3 Psychology Tips for Successful Goal Setting

1. Set high-low range goals. People are more likely to engage when they have set a high-low range goal (for example, lose 2–4 pounds this week) than when they have set a single number goal.

Habits and Behaviors

Forming a new habit is extremely challenging for most people, and it takes both motivation and deliberate practice over time to build neuroplasticity. Using mindfulness meditation as an example, several studies suggest that it takes three to eight weeks of deliberate practice to result in changes at a neural level (that is, increased cortical thickening in the hippocampus and other areas). However, those observed changes in the brain may not necessarily immediately translate to improved behavior.

Research by Phillippa Lally and colleagues at the University College London suggests that new behaviors can become automatic in, on average, 66 days (their study range was 18 to 254 days), but it depends on the complexity of the new behavior you are trying to put into place as well as your personality. Indeed, it takes more than a one-shot training program or brief coaching engagement to ensure someone has enough practice to both create the neuronal firing and automicity associated with new habits.

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part of your routine. Focus on the gap between your current self and your ideal self to enhance desire to change. Such a focus will activate key areas of the brain associated with goal acceptance and motivation.

Use tiny steps to simplify achievement. Successful behavior change is a result of adequate motivation, ease or difficulty of the goal, and a trigger occurring at the same time. Try for tiny habits and reduce a goal's difficulty instead of trying to manipulate your level of motivation.

Hack: Rather than attempting to modify your motivation level, try decreasing the desired behavior's difficulty level. If your New Year's resolution is to get fit by exercising, instead select a specific behavioral goal that is desirable, measurable, and easier. For example, I will run for 20 minutes three times a week for the next month.

Use uncertain versus certain rewards. In "The Motivating-Uncertainty Effect: Uncertainty Increases Resource Investment in the Process of Reward Pursuit," Ayelet Fishbach, Christopher K. Hsee, and Luxi Shen suggest that uncertain rewards are more motivating because they are more challenging and exciting than certain rewards in enhancing activation of our brain's reward circuits.

Hack: Instead of defining a set reward, consider introducing more variability. If you are using a monetary reward, increase motivation by offering a 50 percent chance of getting $20 or $50 versus 100 percent chance of garnering $75.

Focus on what's completed versus what's left to do. Research suggests that there is greater motivation when people focus on completed progress at the beginning and lack of progress toward the end of goal pursuit.

Hack: When starting, track what you are doing daily or weekly and reward yourself for what you have done. Toward the end of your goal, maximize motivation by focusing on the remaining progress.

Keep dividing your goal into smaller steps. We all start a new habit change effort with excitement. However, most people are likely to slack off or lose enthusiasm around the middle of a project. So, a shorter distance between you and your goal is more motivating than a longer one.

Hack: Combine the second and fourth hacks above to break your initial goal into smaller subgoals that are easier to track and obtain. Then, turn your attention to what is left to maximize motivation to complete your goal and make it automatic.

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Share your goals with others. People who write down their goals, share their commitment with others, and send weekly progress reports are 33 percent more successful than those who do not.

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Facts and hacks about goal striving

Motivation to set goals is a poor predictor of goal success and long-term habit change. Motivation gets you started, but habits keep you going. Let's look at ways to ensure goal planning and long-term success using the default-mode brain network associated with self-reflection, emotional control, learning and memory, identifying emotions in others, and the parasympathetic relaxation response.

Use if/then practice plans. Just defining a desired future behavior is unlikely to result in successful change. If/then implementation plans have been shown to double a person's likelihood of achieving success.

Hack: If/then goals have two components. The *if* is a situation, time, or trigger—a weekly staff meeting or time of the day, for example—that cues up a behavior you want to practice. The *then* is the specific behavior you want to implement. It may be doing something more, less, or differently.

Instead of a goal intention such as "I want to be a better active listener," translate that into an implementation intention using an if/then approach: "If I am leading my weekly team meeting, then I will solicit input from other team members and summarize what I hear."

Repeat after me: Neurons that wire together, fire together. In general, it takes six to eight repetitions of a new behavior close in time to begin neurowiring. For complex behaviors to become automatic, people need an average of 65 to 91 days of deliberate practice to enhance those newly formed rituals to become habits.

Hack: Build in adequate nudges to keep the goal visible, and use the full range of rewards and social support to ensure continuous practice to facilitate neuroplasticity and habit formation. Tracking and monitoring progress helps reinforce the desired behavior and provides a metric of success, motivating you to continue with your goals even when you hit inevitable bumps.

Practice makes better, not perfect. There is little evidence to support the oft-cited "rule" that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert. The sheer number of hours of practice is not as important as the quality of deliberate practice. Further, expert performance varies among individuals and domain.

Hack: Deliberate, challenging, and varied practice over a period of time will make a person better—but only up to a finite genetic set point for each individual. It appears that expertise in one's field is more the intersection of deliberate practice and innate ability. Indeed, leadership development programs focusing on learning transfer are unlikely to convert competent jerks to competent stars regardless of how much a person practices.

Use social nudges and norms to shape desired behavior. People tend to behave and shift their behavior in accordance with real or perceived social norms. Shape desired behavior by crafting a nudge while reducing the number of choices. For example, if you're trying to save money, you can avoid shopping at high-end retail stores that will entice you to spend on things you don't need.

Hack: Frequently remind yourself about how your performance and behavior should match established norms. For example, post notes on your computer about the importance of adhering to company vision and mission, such as those around accountability.

Know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em. Many of us have heard the saying "Never quit." However, current research suggests that individuals who do not persist in trying to obtain hard-to-reach goals have significantly lower inflammation, less cortisol secretion, and decreased emotional distress. Like the Kenny Rogers's country song *The Gambler,* it is important to know when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em—that is, when it is healthier to walk away from overly difficult or unattainable goals.

Hack: It may be prudent to cut your losses in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Redefine and create easier-to-obtain goals to strive toward longer-term success. Make your goals specific and carve them into bite-size chunks to ensure success. Sometimes training to run a marathon starts by working toward a 5K walk or run.

By adopting one or more of the hacks associated with motivated goal setting (the will) and planning and execution (the way), you are more likely to shift from goal setting to goal success.

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Use if/then goals. Goal intentions are weak predictors of behavior change. People who match a trigger with a specific behavior are significantly more likely to be successful.