Your decisions and behaviors are often the result of a goal or motive you possess. This module provides an overview of the main theories and findings on goals and motivation. We address the origins, manifestations, and types of goals, and the various factors that influence motivation in goal pursuit. We further address goal conflict and, specifically, the exercise of self-control in protecting long-term goals from momentary temptations.

Learning Objectives

- Define the basic terminology related to goals, motivation, self-regulation, and self-control.
- Describe the antecedents and consequences of goal activation.
- Describe the factors that influence motivation in the course of goal pursuit.
- Explain the process underlying goal activation, self-regulation, and self-control.
- Give examples of goal activation effects, self-regulation processes, and self-control processes.

Introduction

Every New Year, many people make resolutions—or goals—that go unsatisfied: eat healthier; pay better attention in class; lose weight. As much as we know our lives would improve if we actually achieved these goals, people quite often don't follow through. But what if that didn't have to be the case? What if every time we made a goal, we actually accomplished it? Each
day, our behavior is the result of countless goals—maybe not goals in the way we think of them, like getting that beach body or being the first person to land on Mars. But even with “mundane” goals, like getting food from the grocery store, or showing up to work on time, we are often enacting the same psychological processes involved with achieving loftier dreams. To understand how we can better attain our goals, let’s begin with defining what a goal is and what underlies it, psychologically.

A goal is the cognitive representation of a desired state, or, in other words, our mental idea of how we’d like things to turn out (Fishbach & Ferguson 2007; Kruglanski, 1996). This desired end state of a goal can be clearly defined (e.g., stepping on the surface of Mars), or it can be more abstract and represent a state that is never fully completed (e.g., eating healthy). Underlying all of these goals, though, is motivation, or the psychological driving force that enables action in the pursuit of that goal (Lewin, 1935). Motivation can stem from two places. First, it can come from the benefits associated with the process of pursuing a goal (intrinsic motivation). For example, you might be driven by the desire to have a fulfilling experience while working on your Mars mission. Second, motivation can also come from the benefits associated with achieving a goal (extrinsic motivation), such as the fame and fortune that come with being the first person on Mars (Deci & Ryan, 1985). One easy way to consider intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is through the eyes of a student. Does the student work hard on assignments because the act of learning is pleasing (intrinsic motivation)? Or does the student work hard to get good grades, which will help land a good job (extrinsic motivation)?

Social psychologists recognize that goal pursuit and the motivations that underlie it do not depend solely on an individual’s personality. Rather, they are products of personal characteristics and situational factors. Indeed, cues in a person’s immediate environment—including images, words, sounds, and the presence of other people—can activate, or prime, a goal. This activation can be conscious, such that the person is aware of the environmental cues influencing his/her pursuit of a goal. However, this activation can also occur outside a
person's awareness, and lead to nonconscious goal pursuit. In this case, the person is unaware of why s/he is pursuing a goal and may not even realize that s/he is pursuing it.

In this module, we review key aspects of goals and motivation. First, we discuss the origins and manifestation of goals. Then, we review factors that influence individuals' motivation in the course of pursuing a goal (self-regulation). Finally, we discuss what motivates individuals to keep following their goals when faced with other conflicting desires—for example, when a tempting opportunity to socialize on Facebook presents itself in the course of studying for an exam (self-control).

The Origins and Manifestation of Goals

Goal Adoption

What makes us commit to a goal? Researchers tend to agree that commitment stems from the sense that a goal is both valuable and attainable, and that we adopt goals that are highly likely to bring positive outcomes (i.e., one's commitment = the value of the goal × the expectancy it will be achieved) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974; Liberman & Förster, 2008). This process of committing to a goal can occur without much conscious deliberation. For example, people infer value and attainability, and will nonconsciously determine their commitment based on those factors, as well as the outcomes of past goals. Indeed, people often learn about themselves the same way they learn about other people—by observing their behaviors (in this case, their own) and drawing inferences about their preferences. For example, after taking a kickboxing class, you might infer from your efforts that you are indeed committed to staying physically fit (Fishbach, Zhang, & Koo, 2009).

Goal Priming

We don't always act on our goals in every context. For instance, sometimes we'll order a salad for lunch, in keeping with our dietary goals, while other times we'll order only dessert. So, what makes people adhere to a goal in any given context? Cues in the immediate environment (e.g., objects, images, sounds—anything that primes a goal) can have a remarkable influence on the pursuit of goals to which people are already committed (Bargh, 1990; Custers, Aarts, Oikawa, & Elliot, 2009; Förster, Liberman, & Friedman, 2007). How do these cues work? In memory, goals are organized in associative networks. That is, each goal is connected to other goals, concepts, and behaviors. Particularly, each goal is connected to corresponding means—activities and objects that help us attain the goal (Kruglanski et al., 2002). For example, the
goal to stay physically fit may be associated with several means, including a nearby gym, one's bicycle, or even a training partner. Cues related to the goal or means (e.g., an ad for running shoes, a comment about weight loss) can activate or prime the pursuit of that goal. For example, the presence of one's training partner, or even seeing the word “workout” in a puzzle, can activate the goal of staying physically fit and, hence, increase a person's motivation to exercise. Soon after goal priming, the motivation to act on the goal peaks then slowly declines, after some delay, as the person moves away from the primer or after s/he pursues the goal (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001).

Consequences of Goal Activation

The activation of a goal and the accompanying increase in motivation can influence many aspects of behavior and judgment, including how people perceive, evaluate, and feel about the world around them. Indeed, motivational states can even alter something as fundamental as visual perception. For example, Balcetis and Dunning (2006) showed participants an ambiguous figure (e.g., “I3”) and asked them whether they saw the letter B or the number 13. The researchers found that when participants had the goal of seeing a letter (e.g., because seeing a number required the participants to drink a gross tasting juice), they in fact saw a B. It wasn’t that the participants were simply lying, either; their goal literally changed how they perceived the world!

Goals can also exert a strong influence on how people evaluate the objects (and people) around them. When pursuing a goal such as quenching one's thirst, people evaluate goal-relevant objects (e.g., a glass) more positively than objects that are not relevant to the goal (e.g., a pencil). Furthermore, those with the goal of quenching their thirst rate the glass more positively than people who are not pursuing the goal (Ferguson & Bargh, 2004). As discussed earlier, priming a goal can lead to behaviors like this (consistent with the goal), even though the person isn’t necessarily aware of why (i.e., the
source of the motivation). For example, after research participants saw words related to achievement (in the context of solving a word search), they automatically performed better on a subsequent achievement test—without being at all aware that the achievement words had influenced them (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Srull & Wyer, 1979).

Self-Regulation in Goal Pursuit

Many of the behaviors we like to engage in are inconsistent with achieving our goals. For example, you may want to be physically fit, but you may also really like German chocolate cake. Self-regulation refers to the process through which individuals alter their perceptions, feelings, and actions in the pursuit of a goal. For example, filling up on fruits at a dessert party is one way someone might alter his or her actions to help with goal attainment. In the following section, we review the main theories and findings on self-regulation.

From Deliberation to Implementation

Self-regulation involves two basic stages, each with its own distinct mindset. First, a person must decide which of many potential goals to pursue at a given point in time (deliberative phase). While in the deliberative phase, a person often has a mindset that fosters an effective assessment of goals. That is, one tends to be open-minded and realistic about available goals to pursue. However, such scrutiny of one's choices sometimes hinders action. For example, in the deliberative phase about how to spend time, someone might consider improving health, academic performance, or developing a hobby. At the same time, though, this deliberation involves considering realistic obstacles, such as one's busy schedule, which may discourage the person from believing the goals can likely be achieved (and thus, doesn't work toward any of them).

However, after deciding which goal to follow, the second stage involves planning specific actions related to the goal (implemental phase). In the implemental phase, a person tends to have a mindset conducive to the effective implementation of a goal through immediate action—i.e., with the planning done, we're ready to jump right into attaining our goal. Unfortunately, though, this mindset often leads to closed-mindedness and unrealistically positive expectations about the chosen goal (Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Steller, 1990; Kruglanski et al., 2000; Thaler & Shefrin, 1981). For example, in order to follow a health goal, a person might register for a gym membership and start exercising. In doing so, s/he assumes this is all that's needed to achieve the goal (closed-mindedness), and after a few weeks, it should be accomplished (unrealistic expectations).
Regulation of Ought- and Ideals-Goals

In addition to two phases in goal pursuit, research also distinguishes between two distinct self-regulatory orientations (or perceptions of effectiveness) in pursuing a goal: prevention and promotion. A prevention focus emphasizes safety, responsibility, and security needs, and views goals as “oughts.” That is, for those who are prevention-oriented, a goal is viewed as something they should be doing, and they tend to focus on avoiding potential problems (e.g., exercising to avoid health threats). This self-regulatory focus leads to a vigilant strategy aimed at avoiding losses (the presence of negatives) and approaching non-losses (the absence of negatives). On the other hand, a promotion focus views goals as “ideals,” and emphasizes hopes, accomplishments, and advancement needs. Here, people view their goals as something they want to do that will bring them added pleasure (e.g., exercising because being healthy allows them to do more activities). This type of orientation leads to the adoption of an eager strategy concerned with approaching gains (the presence of positives) and avoiding non-gains (the absence of positives).

To compare these two strategies, consider the goal of saving money. Prevention-focused people will save money because they believe it’s what they should be doing (an ought), and because they’re concerned about not having any money (avoiding a harm). Promotion-focused people, on the other hand, will save money because they want to have extra funds (a desire) so they can do new and fun activities (attaining an advancement). Although these two strategies result in very similar behaviors, emphasizing potential losses will motivate individuals with a prevention focus, whereas emphasizing potential gains will motivate individuals with a promotion focus. And these orientations—responding better to either a prevention or promotion focus—differ across individuals (chronic regulatory focus) and situations (momentary regulatory focus; Higgins, 1997).
A Cybernetic Process of Self-Regulation

Self-regulation depends on feelings that arise from comparing actual progress to expected progress. During goal pursuit, individuals calculate the discrepancy between their current state (i.e., all goal-related actions completed so far) and their desired end state (i.e., what they view as “achieving the goal”). After determining this difference, the person then acts to close that gap (Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Powers, 1973). In this cybernetic process of self-regulation (or, internal system directing how a person should control behavior), a higher-than-expected rate of closing the discrepancy creates a signal in the form of positive feelings. For example, if you're nearly finished with a class project (i.e., a low discrepancy between your progress and what it will take to completely finish), you feel good about yourself. However, these positive feelings tend to make individuals “coast,” or reduce their efforts on the focal goal, and shift their focus to other goals (e.g., you're almost done with your project for one class, so you start working on a paper for another). By contrast, a lower-than-expected rate of closing the gap elicits negative feelings, which leads to greater effort investment on the focal goal (Carver & Scheier, 1998). If it is the day before a project’s due and you’ve hardly started it, you will likely feel anxious and stop all other activities to make progress on your project.

Highlighting One Goal or Balancing Between Goals

When we've completed steps toward achieving our goal, looking back on the behaviors or actions that helped us make such progress can have implications for future behaviors and actions (see The Dynamics of Self-Regulation framework; Fishbach et al., 2009). Remember, commitment results from the perceived value and attainability of a goal, whereas progress describes the perception of a reduced discrepancy between the current state and desired end state (i.e., the cybernetic process). After achieving a goal, when people interpret their previous actions as a sign of commitment to it, they tend to highlight the pursuit of that goal, prioritizing it and putting more effort toward it. However, when people interpret their previous actions as a sign of progress, they tend to balance between the goal and other goals, putting less effort into the focal goal. For example, if buying a product on sale reinforces your commitment to the goal of saving money, you will continue to behave financially responsibly. However, if you perceive the same action (buying the sale item) as evidence of progress toward the goal of saving money, you might feel like you can “take a break” from your goal, justifying splurging on a subsequent purchase. Several factors can influence the meanings people assign to previous goal actions. For example, the more confident a person is about a commitment to a goal, the more likely s/he is to infer progress rather than commitment from his/her actions (Koo & Fishbach, 2008).
Conflicting Goals and Self-Control

In the pursuit of our ordinary and extraordinary goals (e.g., staying physically or financially healthy, landing on Mars), we inevitably come across other goals (e.g., eating delicious food, exploring Earth) that might get in the way of our lofty ambitions. In such situations, we must exercise self-control to stay on course. Self-control is the capacity to control impulses, emotions, desires, and actions in order to resist a temptation (e.g., going on a shopping spree) and protect a valued goal (e.g., stay financially sound). As such, self-control is a process of self-regulation in contexts involving a clear trade-off between long-term interests (e.g., health, financial, or Martian) and some form of immediate gratification (Fishbach & Converse, 2010; Rachlin, 2000; Read, Loewenstein, & Rabin, 1999; Thaler & Shefrin, 1981). For example, whereas reading each page of a textbook requires self-regulation, doing so while resisting the tempting sounds of friends socializing in the next room requires self-control. And although you may tend to believe self-control is just a personal characteristic that varies across individuals, it is like a muscle, in that it becomes drained by being used but is also strengthened in the process.

Self-Control as an Innate Ability

Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez (1989) identified enduring individual differences in self-control and found that the persistent capacity to postpone immediate gratification for the sake of future interests leads to greater cognitive and social competence over the course of a lifetime. In a famous series of lab experiments (first conducted by Mischel & Baker, 1975), preschoolers 3–5 years old were asked to choose between getting a smaller treat immediately (e.g., a single marshmallow) or waiting as long as 15 minutes to get a better one (e.g., two marshmallows). Some children were better-able to exercise self-control than others, resisting the temptation to take the available treat and waiting for the better one. Following up with these preschoolers
ten years later, the researchers found that the children who were able to wait longer in the experiment for the second marshmallow (vs. those who more quickly ate the single marshmallow) performed better academically and socially, and had better psychological coping skills as adolescents.

**Self-Control as a Limited Resource**

Beyond personal characteristics, the ability to exercise self-control can fluctuate from one context to the next. In particular, previous exertion of self-control (e.g., choosing not to eat a donut) drains individuals of the limited physiological and psychological resources required to continue the pursuit of a goal (e.g., later in the day, again resisting a sugary treat). **Ego-depletion** refers to this exhaustion of resources from resisting a temptation. That is, just like bicycling for two hours would exhaust someone before a basketball game, exerting self-control reduces individuals’ capacity to exert more self-control in a consequent task—whether that task is in the same domain (e.g., resisting a donut and then continuing to eat healthy) or a different one (e.g., resisting a donut and then continuing to be financially responsible; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Vohs & Heatherton, 2000). For example, in a study by Baumeister et al. (1998), research participants who forced themselves to eat radishes instead of tempting chocolates were subsequently less persistent (i.e., gave up sooner) at attempting an unsolvable puzzle task compared to the participants who had not exerted self-control to resist the chocolates.

**A Prerequisite to Self-Control: Identification**

Although factors such as resources and personal characteristics contribute to the successful exercise of self-control, identifying the self-control conflict inherent to a particular situation is an important—and often overlooked—prerequisite. For example, if you have a long-term
goal of getting better sleep but don’t perceive that staying up late on a Friday night is inconsistent with this goal, you won’t have a self-control conflict. The successful pursuit of a goal in the face of temptation requires that individuals first identify they are having impulses that need to be controlled. However, individuals often fail to identify self-control conflicts because many everyday temptations seem to have very minimal negative consequences: one bowl of ice cream is unlikely to destroy a person’s health, but what about 200 bowls of ice cream over the course of a few months?

People are more likely to identify a self-control conflict, and exercise self-control, when they think of a choice as part of a broader pattern of repeated behavior rather than as an isolated choice. For example, rather than seeing one bowl of ice cream as an isolated behavioral decision, the person should try to recognize that this “one bowl of ice cream” is actually part of a nightly routine. Indeed, when considering broader decision patterns, consistent temptations become more problematic for long-term interests (Rachlin, 2000; Read, Loewenstein, & Kalyanaraman, 1999). Moreover, conflict identification is more likely if people see their current choices as similar to their future choices.

**Self-Control Processes: Counteracting Temptation**

The protection of a valued goal involves several cognitive and behavioral strategies ultimately aimed at “counteracting” the pull of temptations and pushing oneself toward goal-related alternatives (Fishbach & Trope, 2007). One such cognitive process involves decreasing the value of temptations and increasing the value of goal-consistent objects or actions. For example, health-conscious individuals might tell themselves a sugary treat is less appealing than a piece of fruit in order to direct their choice toward the latter. Other behavioral strategies include a precommitment to pursue goals and forgo temptation (e.g., leaving one’s credit card at home before going to the mall), establishing rewards for goals and penalties for temptations, or physically approaching goals and distancing oneself from temptations (e.g., pushing away a dessert plate). These self-control processes can benefit individuals’ long-term interests, either consciously or without conscious awareness. Thus, at times, individuals automatically activate goal-related thoughts in response to temptation, and inhibit temptation-related thoughts in the presence of goal cues (Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003).

**Conclusion**

People often make New Year’s resolutions with the idea that attaining one’s goals is simple: “I just have to choose to eat healthier, right?” However, after going through this module and learning a social-cognitive approach to the main theories and findings on goals and motivation,
we see that even the most basic decisions take place within a much larger and more complex mental framework. From the principles of goal priming and how goals influence perceptions, feelings, and actions, to the factors of self-regulation and self-control, we have learned the phases, orientations, and fluctuations involved in the course of everyday goal pursuit. Looking back on prior goal failures, it may seem impossible to achieve some of our desires. But, through understanding our own mental representation of our goals (i.e., the values and expectancies behind them), we can help cognitively modify our behavior to achieve our dreams. If you do, who knows?—maybe you will be the first person to step on Mars.
Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between goal and motivation?

2. What is the difference between self-regulation and self-control?

3. How do positive and negative feelings inform goal pursuit in a cybernetic self-regulation process?

4. Describe the characteristics of the deliberative mindset that allows individuals to decide between different goals. How might these characteristics hinder the implemental phase of self-regulation?

5. You just read a module on “Goals and Motivation,” and you believe it is a sign of commitment to the goal of learning about social psychology. Define commitment in this context. How would interpreting your efforts as a sign of commitment influence your motivation to read more about social psychology? By contrast, how would interpreting your efforts as a sign of progress influence your motivation to read more?

6. Mel and Alex are friends. Mel has a prevention focus self-regulatory orientation, whereas Alex has a promotion focus. They are both training for a marathon and are looking for motivational posters to hang in their respective apartments. While shopping, they find a poster with the following Confucius quote: “The will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential ... . These are the keys that will unlock the door to personal excellence.” Who is this poster more likely to help stay motivated for the marathon (Mel or Alex)? Why? Find or write a quote that might help the other friend.

7. Give an example in which an individual fails to exercise self-control. What are some factors that can cause such a self-control failure?
Vocabulary

Balancing between goals
Shifting between a focal goal and other goals or temptations by putting less effort into the focal goal—usually with the intention of coming back to the focal goal at a later point in time.

Commitment
The sense that a goal is both valuable and attainable

Conscious goal activation
When a person is fully aware of contextual influences and resulting goal-directed behavior.

Deliberative phase
The first of the two basic stages of self-regulation in which individuals decide which of many potential goals to pursue at a given point in time.

Ego-depletion
The exhaustion of physiological and/or psychological resources following the completion of effortful self-control tasks, which subsequently leads to reduction in the capacity to exert more self-control.

Extrinsic motivation
Motivation stemming from the benefits associated with achieving a goal such as obtaining a monetary reward.

Goal
The cognitive representation of a desired state (outcome).

Goal priming
The activation of a goal following exposure to cues in the immediate environment related to the goal or its corresponding means (e.g., images, words, sounds).

Highlighting a goal
Prioritizing a focal goal over other goals or temptations by putting more effort into the focal goal.

Implemental phase
The second of the two basic stages of self-regulation in which individuals plan specific actions
related to their selected goal.

**Intrinsic motivation**
Motivation stemming from the benefits associated with the process of pursuing a goal such as having a fulfilling experience.

**Means**
Activities or objects that contribute to goal attainment.

**Motivation**
The psychological driving force that enables action in the course of goal pursuit.

**Nonconscious goal activation**
When activation occurs outside a person's awareness, such that the person is unaware of the reasons behind her goal-directed thoughts and behaviors.

**Prevention focus**
One of two self-regulatory orientations emphasizing safety, responsibility, and security needs, and viewing goals as “oughts.” This self-regulatory focus seeks to avoid losses (the presence of negatives) and approach non-losses (the absence of negatives).

**Progress**
The perception of reducing the discrepancy between one's current state and one's desired state in goal pursuit.

**Promotion focus**
One of two self-regulatory orientations emphasizing hopes, accomplishments, and advancement needs, and viewing goals as “ideals.” This self-regulatory focus seeks to approach gains (the presence of positives) and avoid non-gains (the absence of positives).

**Self-control**
The capacity to control impulses, emotions, desires, and actions in order to resist a temptation and adhere to a valued goal.

**Self-regulation**
The processes through which individuals alter their emotions, desires, and actions in the course of pursuing a goal.
References


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About Noba

The Diener Education Fund (DEF) is a non-profit organization founded with the mission of re-inventing higher education to serve the changing needs of students and professors. The initial focus of the DEF is on making information, especially of the type found in textbooks, widely available to people of all backgrounds. This mission is embodied in the Noba project.

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The Diener Education Fund is co-founded by Drs. Ed and Carol Diener. Ed is the Joseph Smiley Distinguished Professor of Psychology (Emeritus) at the University of Illinois. Carol Diener is the former director of the Mental Health Worker and the Juvenile Justice Programs at the University of Illinois. Both Ed and Carol are award-winning university teachers.

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