

How Daydreaming Can Motivate You to Meet Your Goals

The Psychology Behind “If You Can Dream It, You Can Do It”

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Overview

At the start of a new year, we take time to consider where we want to be in the future. We make goals for three, six and 12 months out. We're excited thinking about what the next 365 days hold. And what's the most common resolution in America? To lose weight (no real surprise there). But, according to reports, one third of those people will break their New Year's resolutions by the end of January. Why? And can we fix that? Can we think differently to make our resolutions stick longer?

Don't Just Daydream

Resolutions fail when people focus solely on the outcome, as you're more likely to give up when your thoughts turn to how great success will feel instead of focusing on the work you have to do to achieve it. A

2011 study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* found that daydreamers — those that formed goals, but only thought about the positive effects of meeting them — showed signs of giving up on their resolutions early. Women who daydreamed about how they'll look and feel when they met their goals had lower systolic blood pressure than women who questioned whether meeting their goals would actually bring desired outcomes. Why do changes in systolic blood pressure matter? It's a cardiovascular measure that indicates when the body has mobilized energy and effort to assist in physical movement. Women who only dreamed about results showed cardiovascular responses suggesting they were giving up before they even got started.



This lack of energy affects performance. Daydreamers reported feeling 24 percent less energized than people who simply thought about other goals they hoped to accomplish in the next week — and this lessened accomplishment. Daydreamers met 13 percent fewer goals in the following week because they felt less energized.

Daydream Better

Thinking “big picture” about what the future holds and setting lofty goals can be the key to success — if you think about them in the right way. When you focus more on how a decision will impact your whole life and not just the current moment, you make healthier choices. In a 2009 *Psychological Science* study, researchers asked people who were concerned about their weight whether they'd rather have an apple or a candy bar. People who had trained themselves to think about the big picture chose the apple 76 percent of the time, but only 50 percent of those focusing on the immediate moment chose the apple.

The good news is that we can teach ourselves to think in this big-picture way. And this style of thinking inspires choices that align with long-term goals. Behavioral scientists teach people this technique by having them categorize objects into a hierarchy. For instance, you might think of a pair of Nikes (specific), and then train yourself to then think of the footwear category (more general/big picture).

Scientists also teach people to think big picture by asking “why?” Start with a behavior like doing laps in the pool. Then ask yourself, “Why am I doing laps in the pool?” The answer might be something like, “to improve my cardiovascular fitness.” Why improve? The answer: “to live a longer, healthier life.” Forcing yourself to think about why you are doing something and how it will impact the rest of your life (not just the short-term outcomes) can help keep you focused on your goals.

Commit to a Process

The other key part of effective daydreaming is structure. Plan the steps you'll take to reach your goal. Decide how you will get here to there. Considering the process increases your likelihood of success. Researchers in a 2011 study published in the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* found that process-focused daydreaming improved the quality of exercise. People thought about what it would look and feel like to meet their exercise goals. Critically, they also focused on the process. They thought specifically about what they would and could do to meet their goals. Where would they jog? When would they ride their bicycle? How would they integrate strength training? This type of process-focused daydreaming increased how often, how vigorously and how long people worked out even up to four weeks later. Process-oriented daydreaming led people to commit to a detailed plan of how they would fit exercise into their schedule.

Daydreaming also works when we think about the obstacles that stand in the way of our goals and how to overcome them. Brainstorming the hurdles and planning the solutions in advance ensures that we stay on track even when we stumble. Canadian researchers tested the effectiveness of obstacle-focused daydreaming among women between the ages of 61 and 81. Some women thought about and described when, where and how they would meet their exercise goals. They also thought about the likely obstacles and generated solutions. Other women thought about their non-exercise goals. The results, published in 2014 in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, states that those who daydreamed about exercise and thought about the obstacles increased the amount of vigorous physical activity they engaged in during the next four weeks by 87 percent.

Make the Process a Habit

We are creatures of habit. And when we can make the process of exercise a habit, we stick to our resolutions. A 2002 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* study that asked people to track their activities found that about half of the activities are enacted almost daily and usually in the same location. And other research has shown it takes about 66 days to get into a routine and make the habit stick.

How can we make a habit? Take the thinking out of it. The best-designed habits are the ones we don't have to deliberate over. Start by specifying when, where and how you will reach your goal. Research shows that forming specific intentions more than doubles the number of people who met their exercise goals in the next week.

But habits still require a switch to turn them on. People perform habitual behaviors most often when they are in environments that cue the habits. In the yoga studio, we habitually breathe more deeply. In the park, we routinely run further. In the gym, we generally lift heavier weights. These situations cue the habit. And the stronger the exercise habits, the more we rely on situational cues to stick to an exercise regimen.

A 2005 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that when students transferred to new universities, students whose new environment contained the same cues as their old environments were more likely to keep up their exercise habits. For instance, students in the habit of running laps around the track were better able to sustain their routine if they were easily able to find the public track at their new school. Even though running was a habit, the track served as a visual cue reminding them to run. And when their new environment did not have the cue, their exercise regimen dropped dramatically. Surrounding ourselves with familiar cues can help automatically remind us of our habit.

Resolve to Get Healthy

Unfortunately, our intentions don't always match up with our actions. A Gallup poll conducted in November of 2014 found that while 51 percent of Americans want to lose weight, only 26 percent are seriously trying to do so. We set goals to get healthy but struggle to follow through. Why? It might be the way we think about meeting our goals. We need to think big picture, but at the same time think about the process. Relish in what success looks like, but consider the obstacles that stand in our way. This balanced approach to setting goals is key to meeting them.