

Implementation Intentions

Goals

Exercise

3-6 min.

Client

Yes

People often fail to act on their good intentions. Despite their best intentions to eat more healthily, to be more physically active or to declutter the house, people often fail to do so. The 'gap' between intention and action is common. This intention-action gap is observed even when intentions are strong and urgent action is required (such as the need to lose weight for medical reasons). This suggests that motivation alone is not sufficient. If motivation is not the critical element, how do you bridge the intention-action gap?

Implementation Intentions ('If-then' planning) are an effective strategy for turning goals into action. Whereas goal intentions are more general and abstract, implementation intentions are more concrete and procedural. A generic goal intention may be phrased in the following way: "I want to reach X!" Implementation intentions on the other hand seek to connect a specific future situation (an opportunity for goal attainment) with a specific goal-directed behaviour.

In doing so, this situation then becomes mentally represented (activated) leading to better perception, attention and memory concerning the described situation (4). Consequently, the chosen goal-directed action (the then-part of the plan) will be performed automatically and efficiently, without conscious effort or deliberation on the part of the decision maker. This also has the effect of freeing cognitive resources for other mental processing tasks and for avoiding competing goals or distractions (1). Thus, simply specifying the when, where and how of goal-directed behaviour makes goal attainment more likely (2).

Author

This tool was created by Noel Lyons MSc (<http://www.WellCoach.co.uk>).

Goal

The goal of this tool is to increase the probability of successful goal attainment (by predetermining a specific and desired goal-directed behaviour in response to a particular future event or cue).

Advice

- Clients often wonder how such a simple strategy can have such a strong effect. The suggested working mechanisms of implementation intentions are related to cognitive resources e.g. the automatization of the behaviour in response to the future situation or cue. Establishing rituals and routines capitalise on our brains' ability to direct our behaviour on autopilot. They allow us to reach our goals even when we are distracted or preoccupied with other things and to have rock-solid strategies in place for when life's little emergencies

or speed bumps get in our way (1). The key assumption is that by deciding in advance the specifics of each action to take, 'If-Then' planning removes the need to rely on motivation or willpower (which waxes and wanes in most people).

- Implementation Intentions have been found to be particularly effective in habit and behaviour modification, where there may be perceived significant immediate costs versus long-term rewards:
 - Attending cancer screening programs (3)
 - A nutritious diet (5)
 - Exercising more (5)
 - Drinking less alcohol (6)
 - Giving up smoking (6)
- Note that the strength of commitment related to both the plan set and the goal itself is vitally important. Without sufficient commitment, an implementation intention will have little effect on goal-directed behaviour (2) Hence, motivation is important to the extent that the client must want to achieve the goal (over and above competing goals).
- It is important to note too that implementation intentions seem to have a negative effect on the performance in people who score high on socially prescribed perfectionism (7).
- Past research has revealed that implementation intentions can also be used to effectively cope with emotions. In a study by Gallo and colleagues (9), participants who formed an implementation intention to not get disgusted or frightened succeeded in reducing their disgust and fear reactions as compared to control participants who formed simple goal intentions. Clients who struggle to regulate certain emotions, like stress for instance, may benefit from forming implementation intentions before entering a potential stressful situation (e.g. as soon as I notice that the other person upsets me, I will take a deep breath and stay calm).



Suggested Readings

1. Achtziger, A., Gollwitzer, P. M., & Sheeran, P. (2008). Implementation intentions and shielding goal striving from unwanted thoughts and feelings. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *34*, 381-393.
2. Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. *American Psychologist*, *54*, 493-503.
3. Gollwitzer, P.M. & Oettingen, G. (1998). The emergence and implementation of health goals. *Psychology & Health*, *13*, 687-715.
4. Gollwitzer, P. M., & Sheeran, P. (2006). Implementation intentions and goal achievement: A meta-analysis of effects and processes. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *38*, 69-119.
5. Luszczynska, A., Sobczyk, A., Abraham, C.(2007). Planning to lose weight: Randomized controlled trial of an implementation intention prompt to enhance weight reduction among overweight and obese women. *Health Psychology*, *26*, 507-512.
6. Orbell, S., & Sheeran, P. (1998). Regulation of behaviour in pursuit of health goals: Commentary. *Psychology and Health*, *13*, 753-758.
7. Powers, T. A., Koestner, R., & Topciu, R. A. (2005). Implementation Intentions, Perfectionism and Goal Progress: Perhaps the Road to Hell Is Paved With Good Intentions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *31*, 902-912.

8. Halvorson, H.G. (2011). *Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals*. Plume Penguin Books:USA.
9. Gallo, I.S, Keil, A., McCulloch, K.C., Rockstroh, B. & Gollwitzer, P.M. (2009). Strategic automation of emotion regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 11-31.

Tool Description

Instructions

Step 1: Explain the purpose and the structure of an Implementation Intention

Implementation Intentions are “if-then” plans. Research has found that they are an effective strategy to turn goals into action. In other words, forming an implementation intention will help you actually carry out the behaviour you intend.

Step 2: State the intention

Steer the client towards explicitly stating their intention

The intention of my client is:

Step 3: Plan when, where and how

Ask the client to write down or say out loud a statement of how they will act towards a goal in the form of: “If X happens, then I will do Y.”

X can be a time, place, or an event. Y is the specific action they will take whenever X occurs.

Examples of ‘if-then’ plans:

- During the next week, I will partake in at least 30 minutes of vigorous exercise on [day] at [time of day] at/in [place].
- If I eat chocolate for an afternoon snack, then I'll stop at the supermarket on the way home and buy some vegetables for dinner.
- If I haven't slept well two nights running, then I will have a quiet evening in (with laptop off by 8pm) and will go to bed early at 10pm.
- If I have to work late today and I don't have time to go to the gym, then I'll wake up 30 min earlier tomorrow and go for a run before breakfast.

If:

happens, then I will do: