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Reaching One's Personal Goals: A Motivational Perspective Focused on Autonomy

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Abstract

The present article reviews recent research on motivational factors that influence the success of personal goals. Although achieving progress on personal goals is made difficult by limitations in self-regulatory strength, it is argued that individuals who feel autonomous regarding their goals will benefit in distinct ways. The issue of autonomy concerns whether a goal reflects an individual's interests and personal values versus whether it is adopted because of social pressures or expectations of what an individual "should do." Recent research indicates that autonomous goal motivation can lead directly to greater goal progress by allowing individuals to exert more effort, experience less conflict, and feel a greater sense of readiness to change their behaviour. It also allows individuals to make better use of implementation plans specifying how, when, and where they will enact goal-directed behaviours. Support from other people (health care providers, etc.) can play a vital role in facilitating goal pursuits, especially when such support enhances feelings of autonomy. Successful goal progress results in enhanced positive affect and reduced negative affect, particularly if the goal pursuits involved satisfaction of intrinsic psychological needs.

Keywords: motivation, autonomy, goal progress

Every January, approximately half of the North American adults make a New Year's resolution (Norcross & Vangarelli, 1988). The most common resolutions for working adults are to lose weight, quit smoking, and reduce alcohol consumption (Norcross & Vangarelli,

1988). The most common resolution for college students is to improve their academic performance (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002). New Year resolutions reflect individuals' attempt to motivate themselves to achieve an important personal goal. Developing a specific goal intention is thought to call forth a universal action plan that automatically guides people to focus their attention on the goal, to muster effort, and to persist in the face of obstacles (Locke & Latham, 1990). New Year's resolutions are rated higher than other personal goals in terms of commitment; they represent personal goals that people really care about (Koestner et al., 2002).

Despite the importance of their goals and their commitment to achieving them, most individuals who make a New Year's resolution fail to achieve them. A prospective study of community adults showed that 22% of resolvers reported having failed after only 1 week, 40% reported failure at 1 month, 50% failed at 3 months, 60% at 6 months, and 81% after 2 years (Norcross & Vangarelli, 1988). These reports probably underestimate the actual failure rates because many individuals are reluctant to acknowledge failure in self-reports (Marlatt & Kaplan, 1971).

A natural question to ask is whether it makes sense for people to set these kinds of personal goals. Not only do people fail to reach their resolution in any single year, but there is also evidence that they continue to fail even if they repeat the same resolution from year to year (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1995). Furthermore, people who fail at their resolutions report that the failure results in negative affect and lowered self-esteem (Marlatt & Kaplan, 1971; Norcross, Ratzin, & Payne, 1989). Two leading researchers, Polivy and Herman, concluded that the generally negative results for New Year's resolutions make it difficult to understand why so many individuals persist at these attempts (Polivy & Herman, 2002). They argued that the cycle of failure and renewed effort was maladaptive and rooted in unrealistic expectations about the likely speed, amount, ease, and consequences of self-change attempts. They provided evidence from weight-loss research in support of this model.

There are several reasons to question this negative conclusion regarding resolutions. First, it seems possible that Polivy and Herman's (2002) "false hope syndrome" may be uniquely relevant to weight loss attempts, which appear to be particularly unresponsive to long-term sustained change. Other types of goals may be more amenable to self-change efforts. Second, although it is true that individuals typically must make six or more attempts before they succeed at their New Year's resolution, the majority who fail at their resolution report that they learned something valuable that can help them in a future attempt (Prochaska et al., 1995). Finally,

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in a comparison of two groups of people who know they have a specific problem behaviour (like smoking), the group that sets a New Year's resolution is many times more likely to succeed at changing this behaviour than the group that, despite recognising the same problem and wanting to change it, does not formally set a goal to do so (Norcross, Mrykalo, & Blagys, 2002).

Why Individuals Fail to Reach Their Personal Goals

Why do people fail to attain their New Year resolutions and other personal goal pursuits? The most extensive analysis of this question was provided by Baumeister and Heatherton (1996), who reviewed the self-regulation and self-change literatures. They concluded that there are three major reasons why people typically fail in their goal pursuits: (a) They lack clear, specific goals; (b) they fail to monitor their progress toward the goal; and (c) they do not possess sufficient self-regulatory strength to maintain goal pursuit in the face of obstacles and distractions. Baumeister and Heatherton noted that many individuals set ambiguous or conflicting goals, thus making it difficult to keep the goal in focus. Individuals also often fail to monitor their behaviour in relation to the goal; goal pursuit without close monitoring is likely to go awry. Self-regulatory strength refers to a person's capacity to exercise self-control so as to alter their typical way of responding. Baumeister and colleagues have completed numerous studies that support the notion that self-regulatory strength is a limited resource that can be quickly depleted (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

The fact that one's reservoir of self-regulatory strength is limited figures prominently in the general failure to make progress on resolutions and goals (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Altering habitual behaviours such as how frequently one snacks, exercises, or studies requires individuals to exert a great deal of self-control on a daily basis. Such effortful self-regulation is likely to be disrupted by other life demands that can leave individuals depleted and unable to initiate effortful goal-directed actions. Self-regulation is also likely to be disrupted by distractions and obstacles that inevitably arise when pursuing an important long-term goal.

It thus seems important for goal setters to confront the fact that they have limited self-regulatory strength and to plan carefully how they can conserve this resource; that is, goal setters need to find a way to pursue their goals in a manner that minimises the demand on self-control resources.

Overcoming Our Limitations in Self-Regulatory Strength

One way in which self-regulatory strength can be preserved is by automating goal pursuit. There is evidence that carefully formulated implementation plans can transform conscious goals into automatic habits that allow individuals to overcome typical resource barriers (Gollwitzer, 1999; Webb & Sheeran, 2004). Implementation plans are mental planning exercises in which goal setters specify when and where they will initiate their goal pursuit and how they will ensure their persistence in the face of distractions and obstacles (Gollwitzer, 1999). For example, someone who is trying to eat more healthily may plan to stop eating potato chips when they watch TV in the evening and eat a piece of fruit instead. Implementation intentions are thought to enhance successful goal striving because they link the desired behaviours with certain

situations and allow for automatic responding without having to make decisions continually about when and how to act upon one's goals (Gollwitzer & Schaal, 1998). Implementation intentions can also be tied to subjective motivational states (Achtziger, Gollwitzer, & Sheeran, in press). A recent meta-analysis of over 100 studies confirmed that people who supplemented their goals with implementation intentions had markedly higher rates of success across diverse goal domains (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

The process by which people select and frame their goals may also influence whether they will be able to call forth the self-regulatory strength needed to maintain them. An early community-based prospective study of people's success at New Year's resolutions found that the two best prospective predictors of resolution success were participants' readiness and self-efficacy toward the goal (Norcross et al., 1989). Readiness refers to the extent to which individuals felt they were well prepared to pursue their goal at this particular time. Self-efficacy refers to a sense of confidence in one's ability to perform specific actions that lead to desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is distinct from general self-esteem and does not exactly match actual ability for a task (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is associated with important motivational processes such as enhanced effort and commitment, selection of more challenging goals, keener focus on goal pursuit, and perseverance in the face of difficulties (Bandura, 1997), all of which facilitate goal attainment.

The Role of Autonomy in Goal Pursuit

My own interest in New Year's resolutions developed because I teach a course in human motivation that begins in the first week of January. I thought that, by collecting data from college students about their resolutions, I would have something relevant with which to begin my class. In an initial study, students were asked to list their resolutions, indicate their two most important resolutions, and then rate each resolution in terms of readiness and self-efficacy (Greenstein & Koestner, 1994). Participants were also asked to rate why they set their resolutions to distinguish the degree to which they had autonomous motivation for their resolution.

Figure 1 gives examples of resolutions set by university students. The numbers in the parentheses indicate the percentage of success that participants reported at the 2-month follow-up. An examination of the first three sets of resolutions reflects the common problem of setting ambiguous goals. Person A displays the problem of setting too many goals, including some that would naturally seem to be in conflict. Person B ends her list with a goal stated in the terms of avoidance rather than approach. Person C begins his resolutions with one that proclaims low feelings of self-efficacy, even in the way he writes the goal. It is interesting that Person D sets goals in exactly the recommended manner—there are only two, and they are specific, measurable, and realistic—yet she also failed to reach her goals.

Perhaps the way in which individuals organise and frame their goals is not sufficient to ensure their success. What seemed to be missing in previous research on resolutions and goals was that no one examined people's motivation for setting their goal. A person can have many different reasons for setting a goal, and these reasons vary in the extent to which they represent autonomy (Ryan, 1995). The issue of autonomy concerns whether a goal reflects an individual's interests and personal values versus

<p>Person A</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do volunteer work (0%) • Keep up with school work (25%) • Be a Nicer Person • Write home more often • Read more good books 	<p>Person B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do really well this semester! (50%) • Get over my ex-boyfriend once and for all (10%) • To not be so neurotic
<p>Person C</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempt to keep up with readings (10%) • Eat better (20%) • Do volunteer work • Spend at least 4 hours per week in the library 	<p>Person D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drink 8 glasses of water a day (10%) • Exercise 3 or 4 times per week (40%)

Figure 1. Examples of New Year's resolutions set by college students. Numbers in parentheses indicate reported percentage of success with the resolution at 2 months follow-up. Follow-up involved only the students' two most important resolutions.

whether it is adopted because of social pressures or expectations of what an individual "should do" (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Self-determination theory argues that autonomy is a universal psychological need, the satisfaction of which is critical to development and adjustment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Whether a goal is autonomous may well influence how goal pursuit is regulated and whether it will meet with success (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Goals that are not endorsed by the self are likely to generate intrapersonal conflict, whereas autonomous goals allow individuals to draw on volitional resources such as the capacity to exert sustained effort (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001).

Previous research in diverse domains showed that more autonomous motivation is associated with more adaptive functioning (Koestner & Losier, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vallerand et al., 1997). Specifically, autonomous motivation has been associated with active information seeking (Koestner, Losier, Vallerand, & Carducci, 1996), resistance to persuasion (Koestner, Houliort, Paquet, & Knight, 2001), consistent behaviour (Koestner, Bernieri, & Zuckerman, 1992), emotional congruence regarding one's behaviours (Koestner et al., 1996), positive emotions (Koestner & Losier, 2003), effective interpersonal functioning (Koestner & Losier, 1996), resilience in face of setbacks (Koestner & Zuckerman, 1994), and better learning (Burton, Lydon, D'Alessandro, Koestner, 2006).

An initial study of New Year's resolutions replicated Norcross et al. (1989) by showing that readiness and self-efficacy were each significantly predictive of goal progress over 2 months (Greenstein & Koestner, 1994). However, it also showed that autonomy was significantly positively related to goal progress. Autonomy was measured by asking participants to rate four different reasons that ranged from highly autonomous (e.g., "because it is personally interesting") to highly controlled (e.g., "because somebody else

wants me to"). Our results showed that students who endorsed autonomous reasons reported greater progress on their resolutions than those who had controlled reasons. Goal autonomy was unrelated to goal self-efficacy and was moderately positively related to readiness. Subsequent studies suggested that motivational differences related to autonomy may underlie whether individuals feel ready to pursue a goal (cf. Parfitt, Rose, & Burgess, 2006).

The importance of autonomous motivation in goal pursuits was more fully explored by Sheldon and colleagues, who completed a series of short-term prospective studies that examined the extent to which the source of goals influenced their attainment (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001; Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Participants were asked to list several goals that they planned to strive for during the semester and to rate the goals in terms of the source of their motivation. *Autonomous* goals were defined as those that reflected personal interests and values rather than something one feels compelled to do by external or internal pressures. These studies consistently found that autonomous goals were significantly associated with greater goal progress over time than nonautonomous goals. Other researchers obtained the same pattern of results (Downie, Koestner, Horberg, & Haga, 2006; Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005; Koestner et al., 2006; Koestner et al., 2002).

A recent meta-analysis of 12 prospective studies examining the relation of goal autonomy to goal progress yielded an average r of .20 (Koestner, Otis, Powers, Pelletier, & Gagnon, in press). Thus, having goals that are tied to personal interests and values was consistently related to greater goal progress.

The goal autonomy studies cited earlier also examined the parameters of the relationship between self-concordance and goal progress. Thus, it was shown that the benefits of having autonomous goals were maintained after controlling for neuroticism (Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001) and self-

regulatory skill (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Autonomous goals were also associated with greater goal progress even when controlling for other important goal variables such as importance, commitment, and difficulty level (Koestner et al., 2002). The benefits of autonomy were demonstrated with sophisticated goal attainment scaling methods (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998) and objective measures of goal progress (Koestner et al., in press). Self-reports of goal autonomy were confirmed by peer reports, and it was shown that the goal progress effects held up over a 5-month time span (Koestner et al., 2006). Finally, the effect of autonomy on progress was shown to be mediated by the capacity to maintain sustained effort (Downie et al., 2006; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998, 1999). That is, autonomous goals appear to be protected and maintained in the face of task-irrelevant temptations because they are continually energised.

It is useful to compare the effects of autonomy on goal progress with those obtained for goal self-efficacy. Many of the studies that assessed goal motivation also included an assessment of self-efficacy (e.g., Koestner et al., 2002). A meta-analysis of eight studies indicated that the average r between self-efficacy and goal progress was also .20. These studies generally found that goal self-efficacy and goal autonomy were only modestly correlated and that the effects of autonomy and self-efficacy are relatively independent. It is interesting to note that one recent study showed that feelings of goal self-efficacy could be improved by using techniques recommended by Bandura (1997). Specifically, participants who did a brief written exercise in which they (a) listed previous mastery experiences for a similar goal and (b) listed examples of people who were similar to them who succeeded at a similar goal showed an increase in subsequent goal efficacy. Furthermore, participants who received the efficacy-boosting intervention also displayed significantly higher goal progress at a 5-month follow-up (Koestner et al., 2006, Study 2).

There are two problems with the research examining the relation of autonomy to goal progress. First, the size of the relation between goal autonomy and progress, Pearson $r = .20$, although statistically significant, would be categorised as small. It is the kind of relation that could not be easily recognised by observers. The second problem is that research on autonomy and goals is almost entirely correlational in nature, thus leaving open the possibility that some unmeasured third variable is accounting for both the level of autonomy and the goal progress.

Two attempts to use experimental procedures to enhance autonomy for goals and to measure subsequent goal progress yielded only partially successful results. Koestner et al. (2002) demonstrated that a brief self-reflection exercise, in which participants considered the intrinsic, personally meaningful reasons for pursuing New Year's resolutions, increased their level of autonomy for the goals and that goal autonomy, in turn, was associated with goal progress. The study failed, however, to find a direct effect of being in the self-reflection condition on goal progress. Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share (2002) randomly assigned college student participants either to a goal-training program focused on enhancing autonomy or to a control condition. The goal training program was designed to "enhance participants' sense of ownership of their listed goals and also their ability to regulate their experiences as they pursued the goals" (Sheldon et al., 2002, p. 8). The intervention consisted of two counselling sessions in which diverse methods were used to present and reinforce strategies for enhancing

goal functioning. The results revealed no main effects of program participation on later goal attainment, but a significant interaction effect indicated that participants who were already high in autonomy perceived the program as most useful and benefited the most from the program in terms of goal attainment.

Indirect Effects of Autonomy on Goal Progress

The obtained $r = .20$ correlation between goal autonomy and goal progress may underestimate the importance of autonomy in goal pursuit. In addition to Sheldon et al.'s (2002) finding that individual differences in autonomy moderated the effect of a goal training program, there is evidence that, when people have autonomous goals, they are better prepared to use implementation plans to reach their goals. Recall that recent meta-analyses have shown that bolstering goals with specific implementation plans results in improved goal progress. In a pair of studies, Koestner et al. (2002) examined the combined effect of autonomous goals and implementation plans. It was hypothesised that pursuing goals because of personal interest and meaning would be especially helpful to progress when such autonomous goals were accompanied by implementation plans specifying "How will I get started?" and "How will I stay on task?" The studies also tested the direct effects of goal autonomy and implementation intentions on goal progress. The results of both studies confirmed that the autonomy of goals was significantly positively associated with goal progress. Thus, participants whose goals reflected their intrinsic interests and integrated values were significantly more likely to make progress on their goals, relative to participants whose goals resulted from external or introjected pressures. The autonomy effects were equally strong for short-term goals and New Year's resolutions. It is important to note that the results of both studies demonstrated that autonomy moderated the effect of implementation plans on goal progress so that implementation plans were associated with relatively greater goal progress when combined with autonomous goals than when not combined. These results clearly suggest that goal pursuits that are both autonomous and carefully planned offer the best chance of success.

The special value of linking autonomy and implementation plans was also demonstrated in an experimental study in which implementation plans were given in an autonomy-supportive, controlling, or neutral manner (Koestner et al., 2006, Study 1). Students were asked to list their most important academic and social goals. They were then instructed to take 5 min to outline their implementation plans, but they were guided in this exercise in either a way that emphasised choice and self-initiation or a way that was pressuring and directive. The results showed that autonomy-supportive implementation plans led participants to feel more autonomous about how they made their plans. That is, they reported that the plans they developed seemed to reflect who they were and in what they believed. It is important that, at a 5-month follow-up, the autonomy-supportive implementation plans resulted in greater goal progress than the no-implementation plan condition. The controlling implementation plans did not result in greater progress.

Why does the combination of autonomy and implementation plans yield such positive goal progress? The synergistic effects of having autonomous goals along with implementation intentions can be explained in reference to Kuhl and Fuhrmann's (1998)

dual-component model of volition. These researchers contend that effective goal pursuit involves maintaining an awareness of aspects of oneself that support the goal while concomitantly developing strategies to maintain the goal in consciousness when competing motivations arise. One can accomplish the former process of self-maintenance by selecting goals that are autonomous, whereas one can facilitate the latter process of goal maintenance by making implementation intentions, which have been shown to facilitate retrieval of goal intentions in memory, heighten accessibility of environmental cues for goal completion, and reduce the number of interruptions while one is in goal pursuit (Gollwitzer, 1999). Self-maintenance and goal maintenance are viewed as necessary conditions for goal success.

Another perspective from which to examine the synergistic effect of autonomy and implementation intentions on goal progress is provided by Prochaska et al.'s (1995) stage theory of personal change. These researchers argued that successful change of behaviours such as smoking or weight loss involves a progression through a series of stages and that there are relatively distinct processes associated with each stage. Within this approach, the autonomy of goals is considered to be of primary importance during the stage that Prochaska et al. labeled *contemplation*, whereas implementation intentions are of primary importance during the *preparation* and *action* stages. During the contemplation stage, individuals reflect on why they are doing what they are doing and whether they really want to do it. Self-checking processes related to values clarification and goal alignment are important at this stage. During the preparation stage, people make a formal intention to change the behaviour and perhaps also take some small action in that direction. Self-liberation is the key process during this stage, and it involves making a choice and committing oneself to action while bolstering one's belief in one's ability to succeed. Implementation intentions serve to bolster such choices and commitments because they link actions to specific environmental circumstances. During the action stage, people actively modify their behaviour, experience, or environment to reach their goals. Common processes during this stage are (a) substituting alternatives for the problem behaviour, (b) avoiding or countering stimuli that elicit problem behaviours, and (c) restructuring one's environment to avoid high-risk cues. The formation of implementation intentions can involve all three of these processes.

To review, there is evidence that autonomous goal motivation can lead to greater goal progress through both direct and indirect means. The direct route involves autonomous motivation allowing individuals to exert more effort, experience less conflict, and feel a greater sense of readiness to change their behaviour. The indirect route involves allowing individuals to make maximal use of implementation plans that specify how, when, and where they will enact goal-directed behaviours, as well as how they will respond to obstacles and distractions.

Refinements of Research on Autonomy and Goal Pursuits

Some recent research suggests that how we define and measure goal autonomy in relation to goal progress may require some refinement. Goal autonomy has typically been examined with a summary index that subtracts controlled motivation (pressure from others and from introjects) from autonomous motivation (based in intrinsic and identified reasons). The rationale for this method was

previous theorizing and evidence that an underlying continuum of self-determination can be identified in the correlations among scales assessing intrinsic, identified, introjected, and external regulation (Ryan & Connell, 1989). A recent article, however, noted two potential problems in aggregating autonomous and controlled goals to form a summary self-concordance index (Judge et al., 2005). First, autonomy and control were not significantly negatively related to each other, as one may expect if a difference score was to be calculated with them. Instead, the scales were nonsignificantly positively related. Second, the relations of autonomous and controlled reasons to various goal outcomes were not mirror-image opposites. Indeed, in two studies of working adults, autonomous goals were associated with positive outcomes, whereas controlled goals were unrelated to outcomes (rather than being negatively related to positive outcomes).

The results of three recent studies indicated that the relation between autonomous goal motivation and controlled goal motivation is variable and not uniformly inverse (Koestner et al., in press). Furthermore, autonomous motivation was substantially related to goal progress, whereas controlled motivation was weakly and variably related to progress. These results suggest that intrinsic motivation and identification may represent the active ingredients that account for the positive relation of autonomous motivation to goal progress. Stated differently, it seems that having external and introjected motivation for pursuing a goal does not reliably impede progress; instead, the effects of these controlled motives tend to be null. Practically speaking, what this refinement means is that individuals who reflect on their reasons for choosing a goal should be most concerned with enhancing their level of autonomous motivation rather than struggling to reduce their controlled motivation. Fortunately, there is evidence that intrinsic motivation and identification can be enhanced by various techniques that could potentially be adapted for self-use (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Green-Demers et al., 1998; Sansone & Smith, 2000).

The Role of Other People

The present article has focused on the role of autonomy in promoting successful goal pursuit. It has distinguished between various forms of goal motivation and noted that implementation plans seem to combine with autonomy to foster resilient goal striving. It is important to consider the role of autonomy in relation to two additional issues that have been associated with goal setting: (a) the role of other people in our goal pursuits and (b) the relation of goal pursuit to well-being. The final section considers these issues.

The motivational role of other people in relation to goal pursuits has primarily been examined in terms of how health care providers help motivate patients to achieve goals such as losing weight or quitting smoking. The role of both autonomous motivation and autonomy support in relation to health-related goals has been examined extensively by Williams and his colleagues (Williams, Gagne, et al., 2002; Williams, Grow, Freedman, Ryan, & Deci, 1996; Williams, McGregor, Zeldman, Freedman, & Deci, 2004). These studies assessed autonomy in terms of an individual's reasons for pursuing a specific health goal, with a distinction made between autonomous reasons for goal pursuit ("I plan to stay in this weight loss program because it is important to me personally to succeed in losing weight") versus controlled reasons ("because

I'll feel like a failure if I don't"). However, Williams and colleagues also assessed the extent to which individuals perceive health care personnel to be supportive of their autonomy as they pursue their health goals ("My doctor listens to how I would like to do things"). Both autonomous motivation and autonomy support appear to play an important role in achieving health-related goals. In one study, autonomous motivation predicted greater weight loss in a sample of obese patients and also predicted better maintenance of that weight loss (Williams et al., 1996). Autonomous motivation for weight loss was, in turn, predicted by perceived autonomy support from the health care providers. In a study of diabetes management, autonomy and competence were predicted by perceived autonomy support from providers, and changes in perceptions of autonomy and competence predicted greater glycemic control (Williams et al., 2004). Similar results have been found in studies of smoking cessation and other adherence to other medical treatments (Williams, Gagne, et al., 2002; Williams, Miniucci, et al., 2002). Furthermore, this line of research has been extended to examine the role of goal motivation in individuals' efforts in psychotherapy to overcome problems such as depression (Zuroff et al., 2007).

Some research has also explored the role of friends and family in facilitating personal goal pursuit. Social support can facilitate progress on personal goals because it serves to enhance feelings of self-efficacy, transforms the interest level of goal-related activities, and helps individuals generate effective coping strategies (Aspinwall, 2004). Self-determination theory research has shown, however, that the effect of other people's motivational support will depend on whether it is perceived as autonomy supportive versus controlling (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Downie et al., 2007). Autonomy support involves taking another's perspective, acknowledging feelings, and encouraging self-initiation and self-direction (Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984). Control involves pressuring someone to act, think, or feel in a particular way. Earlier studies showed that motivational effect of rewards, limits, and feedback depended on whether they were delivered in an autonomy-supportive rather than controlling manner (Deci et al., 1999; Joussemet, Koestner, Lekes, & Houliort, 2004).

A recent study examined the role of autonomy support from family and friends on participants' goal motivation and weight-related goal progress over time (Powers & Koestner, 2007). Female college students who had the goal to lose weight reported on the support they received from significant others (and their current goal progress) three times over a month's time. All participants were also given information on healthy weight loss strategies, but this information was conveyed in an autonomy-supportive versus neutral manner. The results showed that participants reported significantly greater weight loss when they perceived their family and friends as supporting their autonomy as they pursued their goal. An example of an item assessing autonomy support was, "I feel that my family and friends understood how I see things with respect to my weight." Autonomy support from family and friends also interacted with the autonomy-supportive instruction to produce higher levels of progress. The effects of autonomy support were distinguished from more controlling support from significant others, which did not show similar effects. An example of an item assessing controlling support was, "My family and friends consistently called attention to situations where I had to control my behavior." The findings highlight the importance of developing

measures of peer and family autonomy support and also point to the potential usefulness of developing intervention strategies focused on facilitating the autonomy-supportive behaviour of these significant others. Indeed, another recent study showed that autonomy support from important others provided variance distinct from the measure of autonomy support from health care providers and that when allowed to compete for variance, the important other measure appeared to be the stronger and more consistent predictor of dietary outcomes (Williams et al., 2006).

Goal Pursuits and Well-Being

What is the relation of goal pursuit to well-being? People generally expect to feel good if they successfully reach their goals. Indeed, models of well-being suggest that goals serve as an important reference for the affect system, so that people react positively when they make progress toward goals and negatively when they fail to reach their goals (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). A meta-analysis showed that goal progress is associated with increased positive affect and decreased negative affect (Koestner et al., 2002). Specifically, a moderately large effect size was obtained, $r = .31$, and the effects were homogeneous across studies. Clearly, there is an emotional payoff for making progress toward one's goals.

There is evidence that goal attainment results in enhanced well-being because it promotes need-satisfying experiences related to feeling autonomous (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). There has also been support for the hypothesis that goal attainment will fail to be accompanied by enhanced well-being if people pursue extrinsic goals that are incongruent with intrinsic needs (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). Finally, there is evidence that the relations from autonomy to goal progress and from goal progress to well-being are bidirectional. Thus, using a two-cycle prospective design, Sheldon and Houser-Marko (2001) demonstrated not only that goal progress results in greater well-being but also that the enhanced well-being promotes the setting of more autonomous goals which, in turn, fosters further goal attainment and well-being enhancement. Similar evidence was obtained by Sheldon and colleagues (2002).

Conclusion

The present article reviews recent research on motivational factors that influence the success of personal goals. Although achieving progress on personal goals is made difficult by limitations in self-regulatory strength, it is argued that individuals who feel autonomous in relation to their goals will benefit in two distinct ways. First, autonomous goal motivation can lead directly to greater goal progress by allowing individuals to exert more effort, experience less conflict, and feel a greater sense of readiness to change their behaviour. Second, autonomous goal motivation also appears to allow individuals to make better use of implementation plans that specify how, when, and where they will enact goal-directed behaviours. Moreover, support for autonomy from other people (health care providers and close others) can play a vital ancillary role in facilitating goal pursuits. Finally, there is evidence that successful goal progress results in enhanced well-being, particularly if the goal pursuits involve satisfaction of intrinsic psychological needs.

Résumé

Le présent article fait le point sur les recherches récentes portant sur les facteurs motivationnels qui influent sur l'atteinte des objectifs personnels. Même si l'atteinte de tels objectifs s'avère difficile en raison des limites de la capacité d'autorégulation, on pense que l'individu qui se sent autonome en ce qui a trait à ses objectifs bénéficie de cette autonomie de diverses façons. Il s'agit d'une autonomie s'appliquant à un objectif qui reflète les intérêts et les valeurs personnelles d'un individu, plutôt que d'une régulation qui résulte de la présence de pressions sociales ou d'attentes à son égard. De récentes études révèlent que la motivation autonome peut directement générer une meilleure progression vers les objectifs en permettant à l'individu de déployer davantage d'effort, de connaître moins de conflits et d'accroître sa réceptivité au changement de son comportement. La motivation autonome en matière d'atteinte des objectifs semble aussi permettre à une personne de mieux se servir des plans de mise en œuvre qui stipulent comment, quand et où elle adoptera des comportements guidés par ses objectifs. Le soutien d'autrui (fournisseurs de soins de santé et proches) peut jouer un rôle essentiel dans la facilitation de la poursuite des objectifs, surtout quand un tel soutien favorise le sentiment d'autonomie. Le cheminement vers l'atteinte des objectifs augmente l'affect positif et réduit l'affect négatif, surtout si la poursuite des objectifs engendre la satisfaction des besoins psychologiques prédéfinis.

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