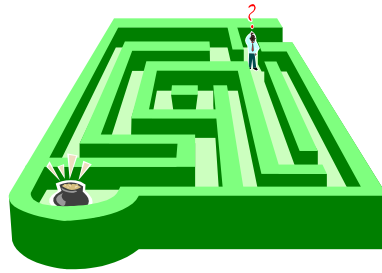


# **implementation intentions background:** **reaching our goals more successfully**



## ***what are implementation intentions?***

"Goal intentions" involve aiming for some desired future outcome. They are of the form "*I intend to attain goal X*". Unfortunately we know only too well that making such intentions does not necessarily mean that we will reach our goals. As the old saying goes "*There's many a slip between cup and lip*". A major review of 422 relevant research studies found that goal intentions accounted for only an average 28% of the variance in achievement of successful outcome (Sheeran, 2002). Subsequent research suggests that even this figure of 28% is an overestimate (Webb and Sheeran, 2006). The conclusion is clear – forming a strong goal intention to achieve some desired outcome in no way guarantees success.

"Implementation intentions" are a way of significantly boosting the effectiveness of goal intentions. The 2008 article by Gollwitzer and Sheeran is one of the best introductions to implementation intentions. The authors write "*Implementation intentions ... are if-then plans that link situational cues (i.e., good opportunities to act, critical moments) with responses that are effective in attaining goals or desired outcomes ("If situation Y is encountered, then I will initiate behavior Z in order to reach goal X!")*". Implementation intentions are formed for the purpose of enhancing the translation of goal intentions into action. The idea is that intention realization can be promoted by forming if-then plans that enable people to deal effectively with self-regulatory problems that might otherwise undermine goal striving. Accumulated evidence indicates that if-then plan formation promotes effective management of various problems in goal striving and increases rates of goal attainment. These effects are observed because component processes of implementation intentions mean that people are in a good position both to see and to seize good opportunities to move toward their goals." (Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2008). They go on to highlight that "*Implementation intention effects are stronger when self-regulatory problems beset goal striving, and when if-then planning is supported by strong, activated goal intentions.*" In other words, it's particularly worth using implementation intentions when we really want to achieve a particular goal but know that it's likely to be tough getting there. Examples include both promoting positive healthy behaviours like exercising more or being more assertive and reducing negative unhealthy behaviours like eating badly or drinking too much.

## ***how effective are implementation intentions?***

Implementation intentions are effective. In a recent study on encouraging physical exercise (Stadler, Oettingen et al. 2009), people taught implementation intentions (and a method called "mental contrasting") rapidly outperformed an information only control group. At four month follow-up they were still exercising at twice the rate of the control group. Other studies have found significant benefits in a host of other behaviours including eating/dieting, alcohol misuse, smoking, cancer self-examination checks, achieving personal goals, new year resolutions, academic & reading goals, work intentions, recycling, safe driving, combating prejudice, and several other areas. A recent meta-analysis (Gollwitzer and Sheeran 2006) concluded "*Findings from 94 independent tests showed that implementation intentions had a positive effect [Cont.]*

of medium-to-large magnitude ( $d=.65$ ) on goal attainment. Implementation intentions were effective in promoting the initiation of goal striving, the shielding of ongoing goal pursuit from unwanted influences, disengagement from failing courses of action, and conservation of capability for future goal striving. There was also strong support for postulated component processes: Implementation intention both enhanced the accessibility of specified opportunities and automated respective goal-directed responses." The authors also commented that "Implementation intentions appear to have stronger effects for people with psychological problems compared to the other groups ... This finding suggests that forming implementation intentions is especially beneficial to goal attainment among people who have difficulties with regulating their behavior."

### **how do implementation intentions work?**

For health goals, there seem to be two main categories of difficulty blocking the success of goal intentions – failing to get started and getting derailed once one has got started. Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2008) describe three common examples of each of these categories. So for failing to get started, they list 1.) forgetting to act. 2.) not choosing a good opportunity. 3.) having second thoughts at a critical moment. For getting derailed once started, they describe 4.) giving in to temptations. 5.) slipping back into bad habits. 6.) giving up when distressed or in a "bad mood". Implementation intentions work by predicting which of these (or other) kinds of difficulty are likely to be important in any given case. This is the "If situation Y is encountered ... " first half of setting an effective implementation intention. The second half is constructing a "... then I will initiate behaviour Z in order to reach goal X." For more practical suggestions on constructing successful implementation intentions, see the companion handout "Implementation intention instructions ... ".

Implementation intentions forge a strong link between a pre-identified situation and a pre-prepared response. This encourages the response to be quick, effective and largely automatic. This "instant habit" aspect of implementation intentions both preserves energy and increases success. It contrasts with the mechanisms involved in the effortful remembering and repeated determination required for acts demanded by more simple goal intentions (Gallo, Keil et al. 2009).

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