Self-Regulation and Self-Control

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Value of Self-Control
Personal Goals and Self-Regulation
  Control Theory
  Self-Discrepancy Theory
Planning for Self-Regulation Success
  Focus on Research: Planning Makes a Difference
  Why Planning Helps
    Automatic Activation of Goal Behaviors
    Conserving Self-Control Resources
  Commitment and Confidence
Goals That Create Self-Regulation Problems
  Approach versus Avoidance Goals
    Why Avoidance Goals are Difficult to Regulate
  Goal Conflict
    “Trivial Pursuits” and “Magnificent Obsessions”
  Focus on Theory: Thinking About the Meaning of Our Actions
    Individual Differences in Goal Level Identification
  Goal Difficulty
    The Ironic Effects of Mental Control
    Mental Load and the Paradoxes of Control
Everyday Explanations for Self-Control Failure
  Excuses
    What Makes a Good Excuse?
    Advantages of Excuses
    Disadvantages of Excuses
  Irresistible Impulses
    Beliefs About Self-Control
    Activation of Impulsive and Reflective Control Systems
    Individual Differences in Self-Control
    Resisting Temptations
  Focus on Research: The Costs and Benefits of Procrastination
Goal Disengagement

Both of your textbook authors are college professors who have taught for many years (first author for 34 years). We have dealt with many students who have failed or gotten Ds in our classes, and academic advisees who were placed on academic warning...
and probation or suspended from the university for poor performance in their classes. Our experience has been that, with few exceptions, students do not fail because of lack of ability. Instead, they fail because of poor planning, poor time-management skills, failure to monitor their class performance, excessive procrastination, competing or conflicting activities, confusion about their college and career goals, or a lack of self-discipline. In short, failure primarily results from students’ inability to monitor and adjust their behavior to the demands of college.

Chapter 7 highlighted the relationship between having (the resources we have) and doing (the goals we adopt), as well as the importance of choosing the “right” goals (personally expressive, need fulfilling, autonomously chosen). Self-control and self-regulation can be thought of as adding a final critical step that facilitates goal achievement and the well-being benefits of success. Having the necessary resources, the right goals and the right motives are all important, but not enough. The ability to regulate our behavior over time, make adjustments, overcome challenges, control side-tracking temptations, and stay on task are essential for goal achievement. Without self-regulation and control, our goals are simply wishes or desires that exist in our minds, but have little chance of becoming realities.

In this chapter, we consider the how of goal achievement by examining self-directed, intentional action as a major vehicle for self-change. Our most general goal is to become the kind of people we want to become by directing our lives according to the needs, values, and personal qualities that define who we are as unique individuals, and that are expressed in our personal goals. To be in control of your life or to change your life means regulating and directing actions according to self-defined goals. That is, the ability of the self to change itself by controlling and regulating feelings, thoughts, and actions to achieve personally significant goals is a major vehicle for personal growth and therefore, for well-being. Self-change may be focused either on the self or on the environment (Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982). Primary control refers to attempts to change and mold the external environment to fit the needs and goals of the self. For example, a high school graduate going off to college to enhance her career potential, or a movie buff creating an entertainment center in his home are both altering their environments to bring them in line with their goals and desires. In secondary control, the emphasis is on changing the self to fit the external environment. For example, college graduates beginning their first career-relevant jobs are likely to be more concerned with “learning the ropes” and fitting in to their work environment rather than trying to change it. Whether we change our world or change ourselves, the capacity for self-control prevents us from being passive victims of life events. It allows the possibility of active intervention and some measure of control over the direction of our lives.

However, self-change is not easy. If it were, we would all be happy and fulfilled. The literature on self-control and regulation may strike you as “negative” and perhaps out-of-place in a positive psychology text. Self-control research focuses on why people fail, as much as on why they succeed, and it shows that self-control is often unpleasant (ask any dieter). Two things are worth keeping in mind. First, why we fail has much to tell us about how to succeed. Every life has disappointments. Success depends heavily on what we learn and do in the aftermath of failure. Secondly, if you think about your most satisfying achievements, it is doubtful that any of them came easily, without self-discipline, hard work, and sustained commitment. The challenges of self-control are reminders that positive psychology isn’t just about the good things in life. It is also about the interrelation, mutual dependence, and importance of the positive and the negative. Think of it this way: If you took away everything you have learned from the bad events in your life, how happy or successful would you be?

The specific question addressed by self-regulation research is this: Once people have selected a goal, how do they stay on task to ensure its achievement? In everyday terms, attaining important goals is often regarded as requiring discipline, hard work, persistence in the face of obstacles, and the ability to resist and overcome short-term impulses in order to gain longer-term satisfactions. Many of these everyday understandings are reflected in a growing psychological literature describing self-control and the process of self-regulation. Research has identified many differences among the types of goals and processes that lead to progress and achievement, and those that lead to failure and frustration. Describing these differences is a major purpose of this chapter.

THE VALUE OF SELF-CONTROL

Self-control and self-regulation refer to people’s ability to initiate and guide their actions toward the achievement of a desired future goal (Karolyi, 1999). Self-regulation may involve organizing actions over long periods of time, such as the 4 years required to obtain a college degree, or over very short periods, such as a dieter resisting a momentary impulse to eat the ice cream he knows is sitting in his freezer. The importance of people’s ability to control and direct the course of their lives has been documented extensively by research. Self-control has consistently been linked to positive outcomes, and lack of self-control to negative outcomes (Baumeister, 1998; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Shapiro, Schwartz, & Astin, 1996).

In a series of classic studies, Walter Mischel and his colleagues studied young children’s ability to delay gratification (e.g., Mischel, 1974; Mischel, Ebbesen, & Zeiss, 1972). Using a research paradigm often referred to as the “marshmallow test” (Goleman, 1995), children were given a choice between having one marshmallow right now, or getting two marshmallows after the researcher returned from running an errand. Most children chose the two-marshmallow option. During their wait, children could ring a bell at any time and the experimenter would return, but with only one marshmallow. Significant differences were shown in individual children’s ability to delay gratification during the 15 minutes that the researcher was gone. Subsequent research found that this simple test of children’s ability to delay gratification was related to future outcomes (see Goleman, 1995, 1998; Mischel & Mendoza-Denton, 2003). Compared to the more impulsive children, those children who resisted immediate temptations went on to become more socially and academically competent adolescents, coped more effectively with stress, and achieved significantly higher college placement scores.

Self-control and self-regulation abilities are critical components of health, happiness, and competence. High self-control has been related to better personal adjustment, less psychopathology, healthier relationships, enhanced social skills, and fewer problems with addictive behaviors such as smoking and drug abuse (see Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Self-control has also been identified as one of the most significant predictors of college grades. A study of 200 college students examined the predictive power of high school grades, SAT scores, and 32 different personality variables, including several measures of self-control (Wolfe & Johnson, 1995). High school grades were the top predictor of college grades. However, self-control was the second-best predictor, followed by SAT scores. Particularly interesting is the fact that, of 32 personality traits assessed in the study, only self-control was related to college grades. Students with good self-control abilities performed significantly better in college. Because of its relation to college success, Wolfe and Johnson suggest that assessment of self-control might be a valuable addition to college admission procedures.

In a similar vein, low self-control and self-regulatory failure appear to underlie a variety of personal and social problems, such as overspending, drug addictions, obesity, gambling, school failure, and criminal behavior (Baumeister et al., 1994; Carver, 2005). In their book titled, A General Theory of Crime, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) argue that deficiencies in self-control may be a fundamental cause of criminal behavior. Some evidence suggests that parental supervision plays a key role in the development of self-control among children and their subsequent likelihood of engaging in delinquent behavior (e.g., Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003; Luthar, 1999; Mcloyd, 1998). Parents who closely monitor their children’s behavior and whereabouts may assist their children in developing an internalized self-monitoring and self-control system. Conversely, a lack of parental supervision may lead to poor self-control and inability to delay gratification.

PERSONAL GOALS
AND SELF-REGULATION

The ability to forgo short-term rewards in preference for longer-term benefits is clearly important in achieving our personal goals. However, working toward distant goals is a complex process that involves more than resisting immediate temptations. People must monitor and adjust their behavior over time, stay focused on the long-term goal, and complete the tasks and develop the skills necessary for goal attainment. Two major theories have been proposed to describe the self-regulation process: control theory and self-discrepancy theory. Each theory postulates a similar set of variables that affect goal-directed behavior, but
they differ in their predictions about the emotional outcomes and motivational bases of self-regulation.

**Control Theory**

Control theory provides a somewhat idealized model of self-regulation based on “feedback loops” that are used to control some process relative to a given reference point (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1982, 1998). The feedback loop is often referred to as “TOTE,” which stands for test, operate, test, and exit. The thermostat on your home furnace/air conditioner provides an example (see Figure 8.1). You set the thermostat at 72 degrees (thermostat value setting) and the thermostat compares the room temperature to this standard (comparator test). If the test result is below or above the 72-degree standard (sensed temperature) the furnace/air conditioner is turned on (operate, turn on heater/air conditioner). When the room temperature reaches the thermostat setting, the furnace/air conditioner is shut-off (exit). The TOTE feedback loop requires a reference value or standard, a monitoring/testing system, and an operating system strong enough to reduce the discrepancy between the current state and the standard. Control theory highlights how people use goals as references for directing and regulating action over time.

According to control theory, when people pursue positive goals (e.g., getting a good job after college), their self-regulation efforts are focused on reducing the discrepancy between the current state and a future goal. By successfully completing requirements in their program of study, students move closer to graduation and the opportunity to find a desirable job. Control theory predicts that the emotions experienced during goal-directed actions depend on the person’s rate of progress toward future goals. Positive emotions result when people make greater-than-expected progress in achieving their goals. Negative emotions result from less-than-expected progress. A student who takes a higher-than-normal credit load and sees that she might graduate in 3½ years is likely to be happier than a student who has dropped or had to repeat courses and is consequently looking at a 4½-year college career. These emotional consequences are independent of the amount of actual discrepancy between where we are now and where we want to go. A college freshman is not necessarily less happy than a college junior, just because he or she has 4 years to go and the junior only has 2 years left. According to control theory, it is one’s rate of progress toward the goal that is critical.

**Self-Discrepancy Theory**

According to self-discrepancy theory, self-regulation is directed by “self-guides,” which involve comparisons between the actual self, the ideal self, and “ought self” (Higgins, 1987, 1996, 1997, 1998). The actual self represents a person’s beliefs about the qualities he or she actually possesses in the present. The ideal self defines our ultimate goals in terms of the abilities and qualities we would ideally like to possess. The “ought self” refers to social obligations, responsibilities, moral convictions, and duties that define who we think we ought to be (e.g., a good parent or employee). In contrast to control theory, self-discrepancy theory views the magnitude of the discrepancies between our actual self, ideal self, and ought self as the bases for positive and negative emotions. When there is no discrepancy between the current actual self and the ought or ideal self, people experience positive emotions and are motivated to maintain this congruence. However, when people fall short of their ideals and “oughts” (their moral convictions or obligations), they experience negative emotions. Ideal–actual self-discrepancies are associated
with disappointment, dissatisfaction, and sadness. Ought–actual discrepancies seem to produce feelings of unease, threat, and fear. These negative emotions motivate attempts to reduce the discrepancy through self-guided, goal-directed behavior.

Both control theory and self-discrepancy theory assume that discrepancies are central to self-regulation, but make different predictions about their emotional consequences. What might explain the different emotional effects of discrepancies postulated by the two theories? Preliminary evidence for one possibility has been suggested by Boldero and Francis (2002), who argue that the reference values people use in self-regulated behavior may serve two separate evaluative functions. Reference values may be used as standards to assess the self in the present, and they can also serve as future goals to be achieved over time. Self-discrepancy theory is focused on how the current self stacks up against the standards of an ideal and ought self. When reference values are used as standards to assess a desired state for the self in the present, discrepancies signify that we have fallen short of where we want to be and therefore, negative emotional consequences may result. In contrast, within control theory, reference values function as future goals for the self. Proponents of control theory note that, by definition, people are always falling short of their future goals in the sense that they have not yet achieved them (see Carver & Scheier, 1998). However, the discrepancy between our current state and a future goal does not necessarily cause negative feelings. Setting a desirable future goal is a positive event that gives us a sense of purpose and direction. When we are oriented toward future desirable outcomes, what matters is how fast we are moving toward these outcomes. That is, the rate of discrepancy reduction—not the size of the discrepancy—determines the emotions we are likely to experience. In summary, the emotional effects of self-evaluation relative to future goals seem to depend on our rate of progress in attaining them. However, when self-evaluations are made relative to standards that describe desired states of the self in the present, then positive and negative emotions may be more influenced by the size of the discrepancy. Because our focus here is on how people make progress toward their personal goals over time, we will emphasize the control theory view of self-regulation.

Applied to the pursuit of personal goals, control theory describes self-regulation in terms of three components: standards, monitoring, and strength. Successful self-regulation requires clear standards indicating when a goal has been achieved, effective monitoring of progress toward a goal, and the personal strength to overcome the temptations, diversions, and procrastinations that might take us off-course. Failures in self-regulation can involve any of these three components. Without clear goals and standards, it is difficult to gauge both progress and attainment. An abstract, non-specific goal, such as a desire to “be a better person,” is impossible to achieve without specifying the behavioral standards that will be used to define and evaluate “better.” Lack of effective monitoring may also short-circuit successful self-regulation. People who want to cut down on their smoking or alcohol consumption are doomed to fail from the beginning if they do not keep track of how many cigarettes or drinks they have each day. The strength and self-discipline to stick to your goals and conform to the standards you have set for yourself are also essential. Any dieter can tell you that food temptations abound during a diet. These would include all the foods you “can’t” eat, but that look so good on a restaurant menu, countless television and magazine ads for scrumptious-looking foods, and the cookie and dessert section of the grocery store.

Unfortunately, research does not fall neatly into the three boxes of standards, monitoring, and strengths. Further, the three aspects of the self-regulation processes are interconnected. For example, certain types of goal standards create problems in self-control strength and monitoring. Our discussion will focus on the differences between effective and ineffective self-regulation. Factors related to standards, monitoring, and strength help explain the “when, why, and how” of successful and failed regulation of goal-directed behavior.

**PLANNING FOR SELF-REGULATION SUCCESS**

Research shows that much of our success or failure in self-regulation is determined before the fact. That is, the plans we make before actively pursuing a goal have much to do with our success. Gollwitzer (1999) makes an important distinction between goal intentions and implementation intentions. Goal intentions refer to our desire to achieve a certain outcome. Implementation intentions define our plan of action by specifying the exact steps necessary to achieve the goal. An implementation intention is a
plan that says, "When situation x arises, I will perform response y." (Gollwitzer, p. 494). So, for example, wanting to exercise more is a goal intention, whereas planning to ride an exercise bike for 30 minutes every day while watching the evening news describes an implementation intention. Specifying implementation intentions is a key element in getting started on your goals and has been consistently linked to better goal attainment. A goal intention without an implementation plan is not an effective basis for goal-directed self-regulation, particularly for more difficult and challenging goals. This was clearly shown in studies conducted by Gollwitzer and Brandstatter (1997).

**Focus on Research: Planning Makes a Difference**

In their first study, university students were asked to describe a difficult and an easy project that they intended to complete during the winter break. Projects included such things as writing a class paper, working on resolving family conflicts, and participating in athletic activities. Students were also asked if they had specific plans about when, where, and how to get started on each project. Project completion was checked after students returned to school. For difficult projects, implementation intentions were clearly related to successful completion. Two-thirds of the students who had made implementation plans finished their projects. Only one-fourth of the students who had not made implementation plans finished their winter break projects. In other words, without specific plans for implementing their goals, most students failed to achieve them. For easier projects, implementation plans were unrelated to completion rates. Whether they had made plans or not, 80% of the students finished their less difficult projects.

In Gollwitzer and Brandstatter’s second study, students were asked to write a report on how they spent Christmas Eve. This report was supposedly going to be used for a study of how people celebrate holidays in modern times. Students were instructed to write their reports no later than 48 hours after December 24 and send the report to the experimenter. Half of the students in the study were asked to form implementation plans for their winter break projects. In other words, without specific plans for implementing their goals, most students failed to achieve them. For easier projects, implementation plans were unrelated to completion rates. Whether they had made plans or not, 80% of the students finished their less difficult projects.

In Gollwitzer and Brandstatter’s second study, students were asked to write a report on how they spent Christmas Eve. This report was supposedly going to be used for a study of how people celebrate holidays in modern times. Students were instructed to write their reports no later than 48 hours after December 24 and send the report to the experimenter. Half of the students in the study were asked to form implementation intentions by describing exactly when, where, and how they would write the report. The other half were not instructed to make implementation plans. The value of thinking ahead was again shown, with 75% of students who made implementation plans returning their reports within the 48-hour period, and only 33% of the non-implementation group completing their reports on time.

In addition to their value in achieving difficult goals, implementation intentions are particularly useful for people with poor self-regulation skills. Studies have shown that creating implementation plans increases the effectiveness of self-regulating behaviors among samples of people with schizophrenia, drug-addicted individuals going through withdrawal, and people with injuries to the frontal lobes of the brain (Brandstatter, Lengfelder, & Gollwitzer, 2001). Health-promoting goals such as screening for breast cancer, exercising for cardiovascular wellness, and taking medications on schedule are also enhanced by having people form implementation intentions in advance (see Gollwitzer, 1999 for a review).

**Why Planning Helps**

Developing clear and specific implementation intentions seems to enhance goal achievement by creating mental and environmental markers that make self-regulation more efficient, more automatic, and less susceptible to distractions and procrastination. Most of us lead busy lives. We have multiple goals we want to achieve and many demands on our time. Without imposing some structure on our lives, we can easily get caught up in the bustle of daily events and feel like we haven’t accomplished anything. Connecting personal goals to specifics plans concerning how, when, and where we will work on them makes our goals easier to remember and access. By specifying a time and place for a goal activity, we create environmental cues that may lead to a relatively automatic activation of goal-directed behavior. For example, consider a student who decides to study for a difficult economics class after lunch every Tuesday and Thursday from 1 to 3 PM in her dorm room, while her roommate is at work. Over time, this behavior may not require much conscious effort or self-control to activate. That is, studying economics at a specific time and place may become a routine, like taking a shower every morning. Few of us make plans for taking showers. We just automatically do it because it’s part of our daily ritual. Gollwitzer (1999) believes implementation intentions contribute to effective self-regulation by “passing the control of one’s behavior to the environment” (p. 495) and thereby bypassing some of the distractions and temptations that affect more conscious, effortful self-control.
AUTOMATIC ACTIVATION OF GOAL BEHAVIORS

Gollwitzer’s (1999) conclusions are supported by studies of automaticity in behavior control. Research by Bargh and his colleagues provides extensive support for the value of environmentally activated and relatively automatic goal-directed behavior (Bargh, 1996; Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Wegner & Bargh, 1998). With enough repetition and consistent pairing of internal and external events, many behaviors can “run off” with little or no conscious control. Driving a car serves as an example. A beginning driver has to pay close, conscious attention to steering, signaling, monitoring surrounding traffic, braking, and checking mirrors. Experienced drivers do all these things automatically. Our ability to listen to the radio or converse with fellow passengers while driving, are possible because the adjustments necessary to respond to changes in the driving environment (e.g., stop signs, changes in the speed of the car in front of you, etc.) can be made without requiring consciously controlled actions. The value of such “automatic guidance systems” (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999, p. 476) is that they efficiently and effectively control behavior without imposing a penalty in energy expenditure. In contrast, conscious self-control comes with an energy price tag. When we are forced to drive on icy roads or during a rainstorm, the concentration required often leaves us exhausted at the end of the trip.

CONSERVING SELF-CONTROL RESOURCES

Self-regulation often requires both mental and physical exertion and appears to be a limited resource that can be depleted (Baumeister, 1998). Much like a muscle that tires with exercise, the strength of people’s self-control ability appears to weaken with repeated use. Research by Baumeister and his colleague has shown that self-control in one activity reduces self-control in subsequent activities (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1994; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). In a variety of studies involving two consecutive self-control tasks, people consistently performed more poorly on the second task. Even relatively minor acts of self-control seem to deplete the strength of our self-control abilities. People who exercised self-control by eating vegetables instead of available chocolates, or who suppressed their emotional responses to a movie had greater difficulty and were less persistent in solving a subsequent puzzle task, compared to those without the prior self-control demands. A recent study suggests that the energy necessary for self-control may be tied to blood glucose levels (Gailliot et al., 2007). The brain relies heavily on glucose for the energy to carry out its many functions, especially those effortful executive function such as self-control. Gailliot and his colleagues found that blood glucose levels were in fact reduced by self-control tasks and that, after this glucose reduction, poor performance followed. For our discussion, the idea of self-control as a limited resource suggests that planning ahead facilitates goal achievement by increasing automaticity, which helps preserve our limited supply of self-control energies.

Commitment and Confidence

Commitment and confidence are two other important factors that contribute to successful goal striving. People who are both committed to their goals and confident in their ability to achieve them are much more likely to be successful (e.g., Brunstein, 1993). Commitment refers to our degree of determination, responsibility, and willingness to persevere over time in the face of obstacles that may threaten goal achievement (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Brickman, 1987). Commitment means making a decision and then following through on it (Fehr, 1988).

Confidence is related to people’s beliefs about their ability to accomplish what they want to accomplish. Self-efficacy, a widely studied measure of confidence, has been consistently shown to enhance goal achievement (Maddux, 2002). Self-efficacy is defined as a belief in one’s competence to produce desirable outcomes through one’s own efforts (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Albert Bandura emphasized the task-specific nature of people’s perceived competence. While some people may possess general confidence, most people’s confidence varies in relation to the situation and the specific task. So you may have high self-efficacy about social relationships and meeting new people, but lower self-efficacy concerning your ability to increase your grade point average. Or, you may feel confident about your math abilities, but much less confident about writing extensive term papers.

Commitment and confidence work together to increase our persistence and perseverance when we confront obstacles in the pursuit of our goals.
(Carver & Scheier, 2003). They provide a source of resilience and determination in the face of the inevitable setbacks and difficulties we encounter when striving toward important and challenging goals. For example, commitment plays a prominent role in several theories of marital satisfaction and stability (see Berscheid & Reis, 1998, for a review). Because every marriage involves periods of conflict and unhappiness, a strong commitment to marriage, spouse, and family helps people get through the hard times. In a similar vein, self-efficacy has been related to greater effort, persistence in the face of failure, and successful goal attainment. In the area of health behaviors, for example, individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to succeed at efforts to quit smoking, abstain from drinking alcohol, maintain physical fitness, and endure the pain of arthritis and migraine headaches (Bandura, 1999; Maddux, 1995, 2002; Salovey, Rothman, & Rodin, 1998).

The dual importance of commitment and confidence for goal achievement and well-being was specifically assessed in a study by Brunstein (1993). At the beginning of the fall semester, college students were asked to describe their most important personal goals for the next several months. Students described a variety of goals including learning enough Spanish to be able to study in Spain, learning to better manage their finances, improving a relationship with a romantic partner, learning to be more assertive, and becoming more independent from parents. Students rated each goal according to how committed they were to achieving it, and their confidence in its attainability. Subjective well-being (SWB) measures were taken at four separate intervals during the semester. To assess the stability of the commitment and confidence variables, these constructs were also measured during four follow-up testing periods.

Consistent with control theory’s predictions, results showed that progress toward goal achievement had a positive influence on well-being. Brunstein’s results also provide clear evidence for the interaction between commitment and perceived attainability in determining both progress toward goals and positive changes in well-being. Students who expressed high commitment and described favorable conditions for goal attainment showed increased well-being over the span of the study. On the other hand, students with high goal commitment, but low appraisals of attainability experienced decreases in well-being. As Brunstein notes, high commitment to a goal (perhaps indicating a goal’s importance to the individual) sets the stage for the well-being effects of goal pursuit. Some commitment seems to be a necessary condition for success. However, whether goal striving will result in goal progress and increased or decreased well-being depends on a person’s confidence and assessment of goal attainability. High commitment by itself is not enough.

**GOALS THAT CREATE SELF-REGULATION PROBLEMS**

**Approach versus Avoidance Goals**

A substantial amount of research shows that the process of self-regulation is quite different when people think of a goal in terms of approaching a desirable outcome, rather than avoiding an undesirable one. Any sports fan knows that the strategy and play of a team can be very different depending on whether the team is focused on winning the game or on protecting a lead. Playing “not to lose” can be effective, but it can also backfire. For our important personal goals, an avoidant strategy would not generally be recommended. Many studies suggest that people who focus on avoiding certain outcomes (e.g., failing a college class) generally perform worse than those who think of their goals as striving toward positive outcomes (e.g., getting a good grade). This is true, in part, because of the inherent self-regulation problems involved in avoidance goals that seem to undermine people’s sense of competence.

**Approach goals** are positive outcomes that people hope to move toward, or maintain (e.g., get along better with a roommate, stay physically fit). The approach goal functions as a positive standard and self-regulation is oriented toward reducing the discrepancy between this standard and the current state. A college student wanting to earn an “A” in a particular class is likely to monitor his understanding of class material, keep track of his scores on assignments and exams, and adjust his study habits according to the progress he is making toward getting the “A.” The larger the discrepancy between his current grade and his “A” standard, the harder he will need to work. The focus of self-regulation is discrepancy reduction. **Avoidance goals**, on the other hand, are negative outcomes that people hope to avoid, or prevent (e.g., stop arguing with a roommate, avoid...
gaining weight). The avoidance goal functions as a negative standard and self-regulation is oriented toward increasing the discrepancy with the current state. In other words, the farther away we are from things we want to avoid, the better.

Research comparisons of approach and avoidance goals typically begin by having people list their important personal goals. An individual's number of approach goals versus his or her number of avoidance goals is used to establish an index of the relative dominance of an approach or avoidance orientation. These goal orientations are then related to measures of well-being and goal progress and achievement. For example, Emmons and Kaiser (1996) found that people with a large number of avoidance goals reported higher levels of emotional distress (particularly anxiety) and more physical symptoms than those with approach goals. Both global and daily report measures of emotions showed that negative moods were associated with pursuing avoidance goals. In a similar vein, studies by Elliot and colleagues found that college students with many avoidance goals experienced more problems in making progress toward their goals, and decreased physical and emotional well-being over a 4-month semester (Elliot & Sheldon, 1998; Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997). Other researchers have connected avoidance goals to poorer marital satisfaction (e.g., King & Emmons, 1991), less satisfying friendships (e.g., Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006), less positive psychotherapy outcomes (e.g., Elliot & Church, 2002), poorer physical health (e.g., Elliot & Sheldon, 1998), and less perceived progress toward and satisfaction with goal achievement (e.g., Elliot & Sheldon, 1997).

Both approach and avoidance motivations are implied in any goal. A desire to do well at something, for example, implies a desire not to do poorly. Similarly, a goal to avoid failure implies some motivation to succeed. Given their underlying connection, why should thinking about goals in terms of avoiding a negative outcome rather than approaching a positive outcome make such a difference? In our social relationships, why should a desire to avoid disagreements and conflicts with others, or to avoid being hurt or rejected by friends undermine relationships, while a desire to be more complimentary toward others, or to share more enjoyable activities with friends promote good relationships? In a therapy context, why should a goal of not being so shy or moody, or not letting little things create so much upset be less helpful than goals of achieving a better understanding of personal feelings, being more accepting of oneself, or becoming more confident in social situations? A number of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms appear to be responsible for the debilitating effects of avoidance goals.

**WHY AVOIDANCE GOALS ARE DIFFICULT TO REGULATE**

First, it is easier to regulate and monitor approach goals than avoidance goals. For approach goals, people only need to identify one effective path to be successful (Schwarz, 1990). For avoidance goals, people have to identify and block all possible paths to the undesirable outcome. This requires constant monitoring and vigilance. If your goal is to do something nice for a good friend, you only have to find one thing. If your goal is not to offend others, you must be alert in all your social interactions to any signs of negative reactions and make adjustments to your behavior if you find them. As our earlier discussion suggested, the energy required for self-regulation appears to be a limited resource. The constant monitoring required for avoidance goals may break down the self-regulation process if this energy is depleted over time.

Secondly, avoidance goals, by their very nature, seem to evoke anxiety, threat, and self-defensiveness (e.g., Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997, 1998). Dieters know that avoiding sweets and fatty foods is no fun. Dieters may worry about their ability to resist temptation and feel guilt from the occasional failure. Dieters also face constant reminders of threats to their diets in the form of appealing, but forbidden foods seen in stores, on television, and in magazines. All these factors contribute to high rates of dieting failure and the unpleasant experience of dieting. The anxiety and stress caused by heightened sensitivity to negative information decreases self-regulatory effectiveness and may therefore undermine goal progress and achievement (Baumeister et al., 1994; Higgins, 1996; Wegner, 1994).

Third, avoidance goals have been associated with decreased feelings of competence, self-esteem, intrinsic enjoyment, and self-determination (e.g., Elliot & Church, 2002; Elliot & Sheldon, 1998; Elliot et al., 2006). These factors may mediate and help explain why the negative emotions and self-regulation problems involved in avoidance goals are so often related to negative outcomes, dissatisfaction with progress, and lower emotional/physical well-being. Simply put, regulatory difficulties and frustrations may undermine
our feelings of competence and self-esteem by constantly raising the possibility that we will fail.

Fourth, avoidance goals are less likely to be experienced as freely chosen and intrinsically enjoyable (two factors found to enhance well-being and goal achievement) (see Chapter 7 for a thorough discussion). It is easy to think of negative goals (such as “not being such a perfectionist” or “cutting down on alcohol consumption”) as self-imposed pressures that make people feel compelled to overcome a habitual or pleasurable behavior. Avoiding long-standing habits and activities we like because we feel we “have to” is unlikely to be fun or pleasant. In view of the connections among avoidance goals, regulatory problems, and reduced feelings of competence, esteem, enjoyment, and general well-being, the pursuit of avoidance goals is generally regarded as a significant source of personal vulnerability (e.g., Elliot & Sheldon, 1997, 1998). That is, people whose personal goals are oriented primarily toward avoiding negative outcomes appear to be at risk for a variety of negative experiences that undermine their well-being.

Finally, some of the problems associated with avoidance goals may be related to the motives that underlie them. Life experiences can dictate whether we are oriented toward approach or avoidance goals in specific areas of our lives. For example, a heart attack caused by clogged arteries is likely to lead a person to avoid fatty foods. However, people also vary in their general goal orientation, with some people having what Higgins (1996, 1998) describes as a promotion focus and some a prevention focus. In Higgins' self-discrepancy theory, discussed earlier in this chapter, the self plays a prominent role in the selection and general focus of personal goals and as a guide for self-regulated behaviors. Higgins describes an ideal self-guide as the basis for a promotion focus, whereas an ought self-guide underlies a prevention focus. The relative strength of a promotion or prevention focus may originate with different parenting styles. Parents who are primarily focused on nurturing their children want to encourage positive experiences, reward independence, and help their children develop the ability to overcome challenges. Their fundamental message is, “this is what I ideally would like you to do.” Parents with a prevention focus are more concerned with avoiding negative outcomes concerning their child’s safety and meeting social obligations such as following rules of good conduct. Their message is “this is not what I believe you should do.”

The two different parenting styles are assumed to lead children to adopt different orientations toward their own personal goals. Parents concerned with nurturing goals may contribute to the development of an ideal self-regulatory system with a promotion focus on approach goals, aspirations, and attempts to fulfill a positive self-image. On the other hand, primary parental concern over what children should not do may lead to the adoption of an ought self-regulatory system with a prevention focus on avoidance goals related to security and meeting social obligations and duties. In line with Higgins’ analysis, recent studies find that people do differ in their general approach and avoidance motivations, and these differences are related to well-being. Updegraff, Gable, and Taylor (2004) found that people oriented toward approaching rewards and positive experiences selectively used positive experiences as the basis for their daily well-being judgments. Avoidance-oriented individuals did not show this selectivity, and showed much stronger negative emotional reactions to everyday negative events that, in turn, contributed to their lowered life satisfaction ratings.

Researchers have also investigated specific motives that underlie approach and avoidance orientations for achievement and relationship goals. People who focus on avoiding failure may have a fear of failure as a basic achievement motive (e.g., Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). In a similar vein, people who worry about preventing negative relationship experiences may be motivated by an underlying fear of rejection (e.g., Elliot et al., 2006). Elliot and colleagues found that hope for affiliation with others, as a general social motive, was highly predictive of approach friendship goals, positive relationship experiences, less loneliness, and increased well-being over time. In contrast, a fear-of-rejection motive was associated with negative relationship goals, such as avoiding conflicts, embarrassment, betrayal, or being hurt by friends. Individuals with an avoidance orientation experienced more negative relationship events, more loneliness, and more physical symptoms (such as headache, upset stomach, dizziness, and sore muscles).

**Goal Conflict**

People typically have multiple goals that occupy their efforts and attention in a given time frame. The interrelationship of our many goals has important implications for our ability to direct and regulate
efforts toward their achievement. We noted earlier (in Chapter 7) that conflict among personal goals can be a significant source of distress and unhappiness (e.g., Emmons & King, 1998; Palys & Little, 1983). Studies have linked such conflict to a wide variety of emotional and physical problems such as obesity, heart disease, and depression (see Emmons, 1999b, for a review). Goal conflict occurs when the pursuit of one goal interferes with the achievement of one or more other goals that a person also wants to attain. Goal conflict may involve competition for limited resources such as time, money, and energy. Activity aimed at accomplishing one goal reduces the resources available for the pursuit of others. For example, a desire to develop a successful professional career may take both time and energy away from an equally important desire to spend time with one’s spouse and children. Conflict may also arise because two goals are inherently incompatible. In Emmons and King’s (1988) study, people were asked to rate the degree of interference between all possible pairings of their personal goals. One participant described the following two goals that appear to be highly incompatible: “to appear more intelligent than I am,” and “to always present myself in an honest light” (Emmons & King, 1988, p. 1042). How can a person fulfill a desire to create a somewhat dishonest appearance of their actual intelligence and be honest with others at the same time?

Carver and Scheier (1998) suggest that many goal conflicts boil down to scheduling problems. That is, people have multiple goals, but limited time and energy. Gollwitzer’s (1999) emphasis on the importance of implementation intentions, in the form of conscious plans about how goals are to be achieved, might be one solution to many goal conflicts. Specifying a time and place for working on each important goal may reduce feelings of conflict and enhance success in achieving multiple goals. Success may also involve establishing priorities and making trade-offs among various important goals. Both of your textbook authors, for example, have women in their classes who are starting their college careers in the aftermath of divorces. Many of these women have young children, jobs, and full-time college course loads. How do they do it? One woman described how every hour of her day from 6 o’clock in the morning until 11 o’clock at night was scheduled with specific activities, including taking her kids to daycare, going to class, working, spending family time, and studying. As long as she or her children didn’t get sick or her employer didn’t demand extra hours at work, she could fit everything into this hectic schedule. When her schedule did break down (usually because of sick kids), her priorities were with her family; school came second. As a result, she typically ended up with B’s in her classes because her exam grades were often either A’s or C’s, depending on the time her schedule allowed for schoolwork. Consistent with the research on goal conflict, she described her life as very stressful and was looking forward to a more “normal” life after graduation.

A recent study suggests that people who find ways to make their multiple goals work together can increase their level of engagement and persistence in goal-directed actions. Riediger and Freund (2004) assessed both intergoal interference and intergoal facilitation among people’s personal goals. Intergoal facilitation refers to cases where the pursuit of one goal at the same time enhances the odds of success in achieving another goal. This may occur because of mutual facilitation or because work on one goal overlaps with the other, thereby helping to achieve both. Consider a college student who has the following personal goals: getting good grades, learning about careers in his or her chosen field of study, and making new friends. If each of these goals is pursued independently, there is some potential for conflict in the time and energy required for each. However, joining a campus organization or club devoted to the student’s major might contribute to enhanced success toward all three goals. Such organizations often serve social, career, and academic functions by providing opportunities for students with the same career interests to get to know each other, and by offering information on degree requirements, career options, and graduate school. Relationships with other students in your major are also likely to provide “insider” information about course requirements, research interests, and personalities of professors in your department. In short, getting involved in your major by joining a student group may serve multiple goals and pay a variety to dividends. Riediger and Freund found that mutually facilitating goals were associated with higher levels of involvement in goal pursuit. This effect may be due to the greater efficiency in the use of resources. Being able to “kill two birds with one stone,” as the saying goes, saves time and energy, and avoids the stress associated with conflicting goals.
“Trivial Pursuits” and “Magnificent Obsessions”

People’s goals may vary from the concrete and specific, such as keeping a neat and tidy house and presenting a well-groomed personal appearance, to the abstract and general, such as a desire to become a better person or develop a closer relationship with God. From the perspective of control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1998), our personal goals contain both higher-level and lower-level strivings that are interrelated in a hierarchy. More abstract goals that express our important life purposes are at the top of the hierarchy (e.g., getting a college education). More concrete goals reflecting how to achieve these purposes are lower in the hierarchy (e.g., spend the next 2 hours studying for my economics quiz). This general relationship between abstract and concrete goals is complicated by the fact that people can think of any particular goal or action at different levels of abstraction. This is made clear in action identification theory, to be described next.

Focus on Theory: Thinking About the Meaning of Our Actions

According to action identification theory, any action can be identified at more than one level (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Lower-order levels refer to how something is done in terms of the concrete and specific behaviors involved. Higher-order levels refer to why an action is carried out in terms of more abstract and general reasons. For instance, a father helping his young son with his math homework could identify or explain what he is doing in terms specific actions, such as answering his son’s questions and checking the accuracy of his work. The father might also identify what he is doing at a higher level, such as being a helpful parent or, higher yet, as being a good parent.

The theory suggests that people prefer and gravitate toward higher-level identifications of their actions and maintain them as long as they are effective. That is, we generally choose to put our actions in the context of larger purposes and meanings that explain why we are doing something, rather than put them in the smaller context of the specific concrete behaviors that describe how we are doing something. However, if higher-level identifications prove unworkable, the theory suggests that people shift down to lower levels. Maintaining actions that are identified at a high level requires that the “how to” (lower-level) basis for action must be relatively well-learned, automatic, and easy to carry out. The father who defines his actions as “being a helpful parent” may have to shift down to specifics if he doesn’t already understand the math required by his son’s homework. That is, if he discovers he can’t be helpful, he may end up identifying what he’s doing as listening to his son explain the math he has to learn, or reading his son’s math book to figure out how to be helpful.

Vallacher and Wegner (1987) argue that the different levels of action identification correspond to varying degrees of importance to the self. Low-level identifications, such as the father trying to understand his son’s math book, have less importance to the self than higher-level identifications, such as being a good parent. Action-level identification theory supports the general idea that higher-order goals and reasons for actions are more important because they are more related to our self-concept. We care about goals closely identified with the self because such goals are self-defining and self-expressive. The achievement of higher-level goals and the maintenance of high-level action identifications represent self-affirmation or self-completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) by providing evidence of a desired personal identity. A father’s success in helping his son with his math affirms the self-image of a good and helpful parent, while reading a math book does not. In short, maintaining our self-conception depends, in part, on the self-affirming evidence provided by our actions and goal achievements.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN GOAL LEVEL IDENTIFICATION

In addition to the general relationship between higher- and lower-level goals described by action identification theory, people also differ in the ways they characteristically think about their goals. Little (1989) put this difference dramatically, describing how some people may devote their lives to “magnificent obsessions,” while others are content with “trivial pursuits.” A similar theme is echoed in Waterman’s (1993) comparison of people who appear to be looking primarily for something to do versus those focused on finding someone to be. You might think that someone who pursues more abstract and self-defining goals would be happier and more satisfied with her life than someone focused only on very narrow and concrete goals. However, Little (1989) suggests that there may
be a trade-off between “manageable” and “meaningful.” For example, Emmons (1992) classified people as high- or low-level strivers based on measures along the abstract/concrete, specific/general, and self-reflective/non-reflective dimensions of personal goals. High-level strivers had goals that were more abstract, general, and based on self-reflection, while low-level strivers were at the opposite ends of these goal dimensions. High-level strivings were associated with more psychological distress and depression, while low-level strivings were related to less negative emotion, but more physical illness. Why would either a very abstract or a very concrete goal orientation be associated with problems?

In line with Little’s idea of a manageable/meaningful trade-off, Emmons suggests that each orientation may trade one set of problems for another. On the one hand, abstract goals may be more meaningful and personally expressive, but are harder to regulate and achieve. In Emmons’ study, high-level strivers listed goals such as “appearing knowledgeable on any and all subjects to others,” “looking at matters realistically,” and “keeping positive thoughts in my mind” (Emmons, 1999b, pp. 53–54). Emmons notes that these goals are admirable, but “fuzzy.” What specific actions would you take to appear more knowledgeable? How is a person to know when he is appearing more knowledgeable to others, or whether he has become more realistic? Both the actions necessary to pursue the goals and the standards for measuring goal progress and achievement are unclear. In addition, abstract goals are likely to be long-term affairs. You don’t come to appear more knowledgeable on all subjects overnight. All these factors make accomplishing abstract goals more difficult. As a result, people pursuing abstract goals are likely to experience more frustration, distress, and negative emotion associated with the conflict between the personal importance and meaningfulness of the goal and the difficulties encountered in pursuing and achieving it.

On the other hand, concrete goals are more manageable in the sense that they are clearer and easier to accomplish, but they may be less meaningful. Low-level strivers in Emmons’ study (1999b, p. 53) described goals such as “Cutting down on frozen dinners,” “Looking well-groomed and clean cut,” “Keeping good posture/walking straight,” and “Drinking more water.” So why would a concrete goal orientation be associated with increased physical illness? Emmons (1992) notes a possible link between a repressive personality type and very concrete and narrowly defined personal goals. Repressive individuals, deny their emotional distress and use distractions to prevent themselves from thinking about their negative emotional states. Despite their denial, repressors have higher physiological arousal and may be more susceptible to psychosomatic illnesses. Low-level striving may reflect a repressive personality and a desire to avoid confronting emotionally-charged issues related to what is important in life. That is, concrete goals may function as distractions from negative feelings and distress. People who “think small” may fill up their lives with many concrete and specific goals to avoid the distress that may result from “thinking big.”

Emmons (1999b) suggests that one solution to the manageability–meaningfulness trade-off is to “select concrete, manageable goals that are linked to personally meaningful, higher-order representations” (p. 54). In his view, the problem with either an exclusively abstract or an exclusively concrete goal orientation is the disconnection between meaning and concrete attainability of goals. The matching hypothesis and Gollwitzer’s research on the benefits of planning reviewed earlier in this chapter support Emmons’ suggestion about the dual importance of meaningful and concreteness of personal goals.

**Goal Difficulty**

The importance of both higher- and lower-level goals also receives indirect support from studies of goal-setting and performance in organizations (see Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002). This research has examined the effects of goal difficulty and specificity on workers’ performance, rather than the concrete/abstract goal dimension, but the results show interesting parallels. Considerable research indicates that encouraging workers to simply “do their best” seldom has the desired effect on performance. Like abstract goals, “doing your best” does not have a clear external reference by which to evaluate performance. Workers are left on their own to decide whether their performance is acceptable or not, and this results in lower levels of effort and performance. Specific, easy goals are also ineffective in producing high performance. Similar to concrete goals, they do not engage people’s talents or deeper motivations and this results in less effort. What does work is providing people with both specific and difficult goals. This combination has consistently been
found to produce higher levels of effort and performance. A general conclusion following from the performance and personal goal literature would be this: effective work performance and success in fulfillment of personal goals both seem to require meaningful and challenging goals coupled with clear and concrete strategies for achieving them.

The Ironic Effects of Mental Control

Some of the most significant and difficult personal goals are aimed at self-improvement, such as efforts to control personal habits like smoking, or eating and drinking too much. Controlling behaviors that have become habitual is challenging because people are typically plagued with thoughts and urges that threaten to break their resolve. Controlling these unwanted thoughts would make it much easier to stay on a diet or quit smoking. What dieter wouldn’t like to stop thinking about food? And what smoker trying to quit wouldn’t wish that thoughts of cigarettes could just disappear from his mind? Along with various addictions and bad habits, we could add a host of negative emotions such as sadness, guilt, anxiety, and worry to the list of things we would like to get out of our minds. Ironically, some attempts at self-control have a way of backfiring by producing the opposite of the intended effect. The effect is similar to the paradoxical effects of trying to fall asleep when you’re having trouble doing so. You can’t “make” yourself go to sleep. The harder you try and the more you think about it, the more wide-awake you may become. Wegner’s ideas and research on ironic effects of mental control offer one explanation for these kinds of paradoxes of self-control—when the more we try, the worse it gets (Wegner, 1994).

Wegner’s initial research made a simple request of study participants, namely to try not to think of a white bear, but to ring a bell if they did (Wegner, 1989; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). Suppressing this simple thought was more difficult than you might imagine and people were only partly successful. Most interesting was that efforts to suppress the thought produced an unexpected and ironic side effect. When the thought-suppression task was over, many participants experienced a strong rebound effect of thoughts about a white bear. In other words, attempts at suppression increased, rather than decreased the occurrence of the thought. You can imagine the painful irony of this rebound effect for a dieter who has been successful in losing a desired amount of weight by using various distractions to avoid thinking about food while dieting. If active efforts at suppression stop because of dieting success, Wegner’s studies would predict a rebound of intrusive thoughts and images of food. The person may have to cope with more thoughts of food than before going on the diet.

Wegner and his colleagues conclude that “...the portrayal of suppression as the parent of obsession may contain a degree of truth” (Wegner et al., 1987, p. 11). Trying not to think about something may increase the odds that we can’t stop thinking about it. Studies support this possibility. The ironic effects of thought suppression are not limited to white bears. For example, comparisons between people instructed not to think about sex and those instructed to think about sex found little difference in arousal (Wegner, Shortt, Blake, & Paige, 1990). Trying to suppress thoughts about sex generated as much excitement as thinking actively about sex. Another study suggests that depressed individuals may suffer deficits in their ability to control the occurrence of negative thoughts (Wenzlaff, Wegner, & Roper, 1988). Depressed and non-depressed individuals were asked to imagine themselves in an extremely negative situation described by a story. In the story, the protagonist (the main character) has an important interview for a highly desirable job, but forgets to set the alarm clock and drives over the speed limit, trying to make it to the interview on time. Running through a yellow light results in a car crash in which a young infant is killed. After imagining themselves as the protagonist in this story, participants were asked to record, in writing and moment by moment, whatever thoughts came to mind. Half of the participants were given the additional instruction not to think about the story and to make a check in their report every time the story came to mind. As you might imagine, the most common way to suppress a thought is to use distraction, by thinking about something else. Depressed individuals were not only less able to suppress unwanted thoughts of the story, but they also used negative thoughts as distracters. That is, their mental control ability was impaired compared to the non-depressed participants, and they also used negative rather than positive thoughts as distracters. Depressed individuals seem to suffer from a chronic and automatic over-accessibility of negative thoughts that feeds a cycle of negative thinking and feelings.
MENTAL LOAD AND THE PARADOXES OF CONTROL

How can these paradoxical, boomerang effects of attempts at mental control be explained? According to ironic process theory (Wegner, 1994, 1997), the explanation lies in the interactions of two systems involved in mental control. One aspect of this system is an intentional operating process that requires conscious effort and can be disrupted by an increased mental load (e.g., stress, distractions, time pressures, fatigue, or alcohol consumption). A smoker trying to quit uses this process to suppress or divert attention away from the desire to smoke. For example, if smoking had regularly occurred after a morning cup of coffee, the person might instead go for a walk, get busy on a task, or think about the benefits of quitting to control the urge to smoke. However, a second, ironic monitoring process is also at work in mental control. This process is largely unconscious, requires little effort, and is difficult to disrupt or stop. The monitoring process scans the environment, memories, and current thoughts for any signs of the now forbidden object. When thoughts or urges to smoke are detected, they are brought into conscious awareness and the operating system is activated to suppress the thought or urge to smoke. The irony is that long-term smokers have accumulated a large number of environmental and mood associations to smoking. Morning coffee, the end of a meal, taking a break at work, feelings of stress, going out to a bar, and a desire to relax have all likely been paired with smoking. So the monitoring process has many “forbidden” situations, thoughts, and feelings to detect and, therefore, conscious awareness of smoking is increased. If the operating system is unimpaired, the two systems work together to reduce and counteract the urge to smoke.

However, when the efficiency of the operation process is reduced due to increased mental load, the monitoring process may overwhelm mental control efforts and make it extremely difficult to avoid smoking. Mental control may fail because the monitoring process continues unconsciously, without effort and without being affected by the mental or emotional load state of the person. The monitoring process increases the conscious accessibility of smoking desires, whether the person has the capability of suppressing them or not. The irony here is that the monitoring process that is necessary for effective mental control contains the seeds of mental control failure under conditions of heavy mental load. By increasing the person’s awareness of the very unwanted thoughts that are the object of the control effort, the ironic monitoring process contributes to the defeat of the mental control process.

In a clever demonstration of how ironic processes operate under conditions of heavy mental load, Wegner and colleagues (Wegner, Anfield, & Pilloff, 1998) had people try to hold a pendulum steady over a target. The pendulum was a pointed crystal weight attached to a nylon line and the target was an x and y-axis that formed a “+” on a glass plate. A video camera pointed upward underneath the plate recorded any movement of the pendulum. If you have ever tried to keep a camera from moving when shooting a close-up picture without a tripod, or thread a very small needle, you know how difficult stopping muscle movement can be. And ironically (especially if we are stressed, in a hurry or distracted), the more we want to prevent any movement, the more we seem to jiggle and shake. This is exactly what was observed in the pendulum study. Some participants were simply told to hold the pendulum steady, while others were specifically instructed to prevent any sideways movement along the x-axis. In the mental load condition, while trying to hold the pendulum steady, participants were also required to either count backward by 3s from 1,000 or to hold a heavy brick in their opposite hand. Consistent with the ironic effect of mental control, people made more movements in the x-axis direction when they were specifically instructed not to do so. These effects were magnified in the mental load condition. The mental distraction of counting or holding a brick increased the movements in the “forbidden” direction. Following a similar method, Wegner and colleagues also found that when people were distracted, they were more likely to overshoot a golf putt that they were trying hard not to overshoot.

Consistent with Wegner’s theory, research reviews find that any number of mental distractions can impair the self-regulation process, leading to failure of self-control efforts (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Dieters, smokers, and individuals with drug addictions often experience failed self-control when they suffer emotional distress, negative moods, or environmental stressors such as excessive noise or overcrowding. These results generally fit the idea that self-control is a limited resource that can be used up, resulting in self-control failure. Automatic, habitual, and largely unconscious processes take over when conscious
and effortful control falls short. From this perspective, negative states (such as stress and bad moods) use up self-control resources because people exert mental and emotional energy trying to cope with them. As a result, control resources are diminished, often causing failure in another area of control. After coping with a highly stressful day at work, a dieter may not have enough control strength remaining to resist tempting foods. Wegner's ironic process theory suggests that the person might even fall victim to a reactive episode of binge eating.

Recent studies suggest that depletion of control resources may be moderated by several factors. First, people may compensate for depleted resources if they are highly motivated by either internal or external incentives to do so. Studies have found that people whose control resources were reduced by their efforts on a self-control exertion task performed well on a subsequent self-control test, when they were given a substantial monetary reward or were led to believe that their self-control efforts would help others (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). In our dieting example, these findings would suggest that if a dieter was keenly aware that a spouse or a friend was very concerned about the health risks of his/her excess weight, or if his or her employer offered a reduction in health-care premiums for weight loss, the person might well succeed in resisting food temptations despite having a stressful day.

Secondly, proponents of self-determination theory have recently argued that autonomy is a critical variable determining whether self-control depletes energy resources (Moller, Deci, & Ryan, 2006). Autonomy refers to an individual's sense that his or her actions and decisions are freely chosen and expressive of his or her true self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). A person might choose to walk 3 miles each morning because she enjoys walking and because she experiences positive feelings from engaging in regular exercise. Such autonomous actions can be contrasted with behaviors and choices undertaken because of internal (self-imposed) or external pressures (other-imposed). A person might start walking because he feels the need to lose weight, because his doctor recommended more exercise, or because friends have asked him to join their walking group. The critical difference here is between the feeling of freely choosing the activity and the feeling of being controlled or pressured. Moller and colleagues (2006) believe that ego-depletion research has failed to consider this important distinction.

The importance of autonomy in mitigating the depletion of self-control resources has been supported by research findings. Studies have shown that engagement in autonomous, self-regulated actions increases, rather than decreases, people's experience of energy and vitality (see Moller et al., 2006). Behavior that occurs in the service of freely chosen and personally expressive goals does not seem to use up self-control energy. From this perspective, acts of self-control do not invariably deplete self-control resources. They do so only when the actions in question are not freely chosen and people feel controlled or pressured. Walking each morning because we enjoy it does not feel like a burden that taxes self-discipline. On the other hand, walking only because we believe we "should" is more likely to test our resolve and self-control strength over time because we feel the tension between walking and the desire to do something else. Support for the moderating role of autonomy was provided by three studies (Moller et al., 2006). Consistent with predictions, individuals in autonomous choice conditions showed greater energy (in the form of longer task persistence) than participants in controlled choice conditions. Only the controlled choice conditions showed evidence of self-control resource depletion.

**EVERYDAY EXPLANATIONS FOR SELF-CONTROL FAILURE**

We have examined a number of factors that can disrupt people's ability to successfully regulate goal-directed action and obtain the benefits of goal achievement: lack of a clear plan, lack of commitment or confidence, an avoidance goal orientation, goal conflict, personal goals that are overly focused on either abstract or concrete outcomes, and ironic effects of mental control when self-control resources are reduced or depleted. We now consider some of the "everyday" reasons people give for failed self-regulation. Research provides some guidance in sorting out these reasons according to their actual effects on self-control. That is, whether they refer to real difficulties or are simply self-serving rationalizations.

**Excuses**

When stated plans are not completed, goals not achieved, or self-control fails, people may look bad in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. Laziness,
self-indulgence, impulsiveness, lack of discipline, disorganization, procrastination, and untrustworthiness all come to mind as possible explanations for failure. To avoid these negative inferences, people often offer explanations for why they did not keep their commitments, follow through with plans, or meet personal goals: “I had too much else to do;” “I had a personal emergency;” “I wasn’t clear on what I was supposed to do;” “I got distracted;” “I just couldn’t resist a smoke, a tempting dessert, going out with friends;” etc. Do these explanations reflect real, unforeseen difficulties, or are they just excuses we use in attempts to salvage our self-image and our relationships with others? The answer to this question is obviously a judgment call. On the one hand, we all know people who are prone to giving excuses for their failure to deliver on their plans and stated intentions. On the other hand, unanticipated events over which people have no control can, in fact, interfere with the best of plans.

A recent review by Barry Schlenker and colleagues provides an intriguing look at research and theory concerning how people judge the legitimacy of excuses in social and individual life (Schlenker, Pontari, & Christopher, 2001). Their article builds on an earlier, extensive review by Snyder and Higgins (1998). Excuses are defined as “... self-serving explanations or accounts, that aim to reduce personal responsibility for questionable events, thereby disengaging core components of the self from the incident ...” (Schlenker et al., 2001, p. 15). This definition leaves open the question of whether an excuse is true or false. It focuses on motivation and purpose. The purpose of giving an excuse is to reduce personal responsibility and fault for a negative event by providing reasons that attribute the cause of the event to something or someone else, or to less central and more peripheral features of the self. A peripheral aspect of self might be simple carelessness or forgetfulness. Examples of more central self-features would be untrustworthiness, unreliability, and irresponsibility.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD EXCUSE? Schlenker and his colleagues use a triangle model of responsibility to describe how we evaluate the legitimacy of excuses. The model focuses on our judgments of responsibility. Because excuses deny or soften responsibility, how we assign personal responsibility for negative events is critical to evaluating excuses. The three components of the model are: prescriptive clarity, personal obligation, and personal control. These components are shown in Figure 8.2. The higher the prescriptive clarity, personal obligation, and personal control, the more personal responsibility for the event is assigned to the individual (identity).

Prescriptive clarity refers to the rules, goals, procedures, and standards that are relevant to the event, which describe what should be done, and how. Personal obligation describes the extent to which a person is required, expected, or duty-bound to follow the prescriptions or rules of conduct. For example, a father has a strong obligation to take good care of his kids. Personal control is the final component, and refers to the amount of control a person has over the outcome of the event in question.

In this model, excuses are aimed at diminishing one or more of the three components of personal responsibility. Claiming that the rules, goals, or expectations were unclear or ambiguous can reduce responsibility based on prescriptive clarity. Every college professor has heard such claims from students unhappy with their grades on tests or papers: “You didn’t make it clear what would be covered on the test.” “I didn’t know how you wanted the paper organized or how many references I was supposed to have.”

Responsibility based on personal obligation can be diminished by claiming that the prescriptions, rules, and standards do not apply to oneself: “That’s not my job.” “I had a family emergency and couldn’t

**FIGURE 8.2 Triangular Model of Personal Responsibility**

complete the work on time." Finally, responsibility can be diminished by excuses involving personal control. These excuses focus on factors that reduce the ability and capacity to carry out an action. Many college instructors hear stories of computer viruses, failed printers, and lost files as reasons why papers are not turned in. Other familiar reasons for poor performance or missed assignments include, "I overslept because I stayed up all night studying for your exam;" "I'm having personal problems;" and "I just don't do well on this kind of test."

**ADVANTAGES OF EXCUSES** Excuse-making can have positive benefits by protecting self-esteem, motivating enhanced performance, and helping to preserve harmony in relationships. Providing ourselves with a reasonable excuse for failure helps maintain our esteem and confidence (Schlenker et al., 2001). Taking full responsibility for negative events, while necessary and appropriate in some cases, can also overwhelm people with incapacitating guilt and self-blame. Lifting some of the responsibility, by pointing to extenuating circumstances or the actions of others, helps us distance ourselves from the event and reduce the potentially debilitating effects of negative emotions such as depression and anxiety. Research suggests that excuses can help invigorate performance and efforts at self-improvement (Schlenker et al., 2001; Snyder & Higgins, 1988).

Excuses may have similar positive effects in our relationships with others. Brutal honesty is a recipe for disaster. We don’t say, “I’m not coming to your dinner party because I find you and your wife uninteresting.” Instead we say, “Sorry I can’t make it; I’d love to be there, but I have a previous commitment.” Demands of social civility require us to consider the feelings of others and avoid damaging our relationships. Schlenker and colleagues’ review notes many studies showing how excuses contribute to social harmony by smoothing over potential disruptions in relationships.

**DISADVANTAGES OF EXCUSES** As you might guess, excuses can come with a price tag, especially if they are used excessively or are transparently false. Any excuse may lead to speculation concerning its truth or falsity and raise questions about the motives that lie behind it and the character of the person who provides it. Further, excuses may undermine the excuse-giver’s self-regulation abilities, confidence, and effectiveness. To see how this might happen, imagine having a co-worker who is always giving excuses for why he is unable to complete his assigned work on time, why he doesn’t volunteer to take on new tasks or tackle emergent problems, and why he seldom keeps promises and commitments. How are you likely to view such a person? Unreliable, lacking in integrity, self-centered, inefficient? Schlenker and colleagues argue that these are just the sorts of judgments that chronic excuse-givers are likely to receive. The effects of habitual excuse-making are potentially quite damaging to the reputation and performance of the excuse-giver.

Continual use of excuses may also reduce an individual’s self-control and performance. An important component of self-control and self-discipline involves our responsibility to others. Knowing that we will be accountable to others provides an important source of motivation that encourages us to stay on task and fulfill our obligations. When people fail to meet their obligations, they may offer excuses to disengage and distance themselves from responsibility for their actions. If this distancing includes decreased feelings of responsibility to others, or if excuses lead to strong perceptions of unreliability so that others no longer give much responsibility to the excuse-giver, then an important mechanism of self-regulation is also diminished.

Overall, the most general and detrimental effect of excuses may be the disengagement of the self from tasks. Following Wegner’s work, perhaps we should call this the “ironic effect of excuses.” To be effective, excuses need to reduce our sense of responsibility for failure, but in the process they may also cause us to second-guess our ability, determination, and motivation to succeed. Schlenker and colleagues (2001) argue that excuses "... may rob the excuse-maker of a sense of purposefulness and control" (p. 25). Rather than protecting the self against threats to self-esteem and negative regard by others, chronic excuse-giving may come to produce the very effects they were meant to avoid.

**Irresistible Impulses**

Another everyday explanation for failed control is the inability to resist temptations and strong emotions. What do people mean when they say that they couldn’t resist a strong temptation, or were driven by an overwhelming emotion like anger, jealousy, remorse, frustration, or stress? Are they passive
victims of impulses too strong to resist? Taken over by something they could not control? Or was it a decision to give in and cooperate, so to speak, with the impulse, by consciously directing its expression? Is it perhaps more accurate to say they could resist, but decided not to?

BELIEFS ABOUT SELF-CONTROL In his book, *The Diseasing of America* (1989), Peale provides many counter-examples to the power of irresistible impulses. During the Vietnam War, many soldiers used heroin. Once back in the United States most recovered quickly from their addictions without treatment. Some even used heroin occasionally without succumbing to addiction. Individual and cultural beliefs about control are also highlighted in Peale's analysis. Alcoholics' binge-drinking may have more to do with their beliefs about a lack of control than with a disease or physical dependency. Within some cultures and societies (American Jews and the French, for example), people drink regularly, but have very low rates of alcoholism. Apparently, strong cultural sanctions against irresponsible behavior and excessive drinking strengthen self-control. These examples suggest that irresistible impulses may be more a matter of belief than of fact. How much control people exert over a behavior or emotion may have less to do with the power of the impulse, and more to do with culturally internalized beliefs about whether they should, or can, exercise self-control.

ACTIVATION OF IMPULSIVE AND REFLECTIVE CONTROL SYSTEMS Research examining the issue of impulse versus restraint is typically based on dual processing models of behavior control similar to Wegner’s ironic processing theory (see Carver, 2005; Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2002c; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Strack & Deutsch, 2004, for recent reviews). Despite differences in details and names for the two processes, most models describe an *impulsive*, emotional, relatively automatic, and quick-acting system, and a more *reflective*, deliberate, less emotional, and slower-acting system. For example, Mischel and his colleagues describe a “hot system” and a “cool system” (Mischel & Mendoza-Denton, 2003). The *hot* or “go” *system* is activated by emotionally arousing events in the environment that may require fast action, such as those necessary to defend against a threat or take advantage of an opportunity for immediate pleasure. The *cool* or “know” *system* is slow, unemotional, flexible, rational, and often leads to strategies and plans for long-term actions. According to Mischel’s model, whether people follow or control their impulses is determined by which system is in control. The hot system leads to impulsive actions, while the cool system produces controlled actions.

In his classic marshmallow studies discussed earlier, Mischel was able to increase or decrease children’s ability to delay gratification by activating the cool or hot system (1974). To engage the hot impulsive system, Mischel instructed some children to think of how chewy and sweet the marshmallow would feel in their mouths. Children in the cool condition were asked to think about marshmallows in more abstract and unemotional terms, as “puffy clouds.” Children in the cool condition were able to wait much longer for their larger marshmallow reward than those in the hot condition. In other words, instructions in the hot condition effectively undermined children’s ability to delay gratification. These results suggest that people’s ability to regulate the activation of the *hot and cool systems* would be one mechanism of self-control. The ability to think “cool” when faced with a “hot” situation may be one explanation for differences in people’s self-control capacity.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN SELF-CONTROL It is clear that impulse control is, in part, an individual trait. That is, people respond more or less automatically, in line with their characteristic level of impulse control and restraint. Some people have more self-control and self-discipline than others. Some of us are impulsive and highly sensitive to short-term incentives and rewards, while others are more disciplined. Concepts of ego-control, ego-resilience, hardiness, and conscientiousness all capture elements of a person’s ability to regulate actions, control internal and external threats, delay gratification, and follow through on plans and commitments (see Carver, 2005, for a recent review and Gramzow, Sedikides, Panter, & Insko, 2000, for an exemplary study). Differences among individuals in the strength of these qualities have been linked to various forms of restraint involving alcohol, sexual gratification, and foregoing a short-term reward for a larger, long-term reward. For example, Mischel found stable differences in children’s ability to wait for a larger reward rather than taking a smaller, more immediate one.
Evidence for trait differences does not exclude people’s capacity to learn ways to improve their self-control. Many heart attack victims learn to control their drinking, smoking, diet, and exercise. Even young children can show increased self-control. Mischel found that the same children who were unable to delay gratification when given no instructions about what to do during the delay period were able to tolerate very long delays when instructed to think in cooler terms. That is, left to their own devices, many children showed poor control, but when given helpful suggestions they dramatically improved their self-control abilities.

Researchers have also been able to increase people’s self-control by shifting their thinking from a lower level to a higher level; that is, from immersion in the emotions of the immediate situation to a big-picture view (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). Fujita and colleagues argue that a key variable leading to higher-level thinking and increased self-control is psychological distance. Distance here refers to a psychological separation between the self and the situation, event, or object. Distance may be increased by time, physical and social separation, and by mentally shifting to a consideration of alternatives and looking at the bigger picture. People often reverse their decisions and reconsider a course of action when they take time to think, when they are physically separated from the situation or the people involved, or when they take a broader perspective rather than a narrow one. Creating psychological distance rather than acting in the moment often pays big dividends in the form of better decisions and improved self-control.

The bottom line on irresistible impulses may be this: If we would all just follow the advice we so easily give to others, we might have more self-control. “Take time to think it over.” “Don’t make an impulsive decision.” “Don’t let your emotions override your judgment.” We have all offered this advice to friends and loved ones, but often find it difficult to follow ourselves. Baumeister and colleagues believe that one reason for this is that self-control is unpleasant, difficult, and emotionally draining (Baumeister et al., 1994). These researchers argue that loss of self-control in the face of supposedly irresistible impulses is more appropriately viewed as giving in than being overwhelmed.

## Focus on Research: The Costs and Benefits of Procrastination

Procrastination is probably one of the most frequent reasons that people do not fulfill their obligations, deliver on their promises, or fulfill personal goals. Tice and Baumeister (1997) provide a revealing look at the reasons for, and consequences of doing later, what we know we should do now. As they note, procrastination is widely condemned as evidence of laziness and self-indulgence. Yet surveys reveal that most of us plead guilty to procrastinating at least sometimes. Procrastination is not without its defenses, however. If you finish a project and devote the same amount of time to it, does it matter if you do it later rather than sooner? And some people claim that they do their best work under the pressure of an impending deadline. Time pressures add emotional energy to behavior, perhaps leading to better performance.

In two longitudinal studies, Tice and Baumeister investigated the possible costs and benefits of procrastination. To evaluate the effects of procrastination, these researchers compared the emotional/physical health consequences and the performance of procrastinating and non-procrastinating college students taking a health psychology class. Each of their two studies took place over the course of a semester. Students were classified as procrastinators or non-procrastinators by their score on a standardized scale assessing people’s tendency to procrastinate. Health problems were measured in terms of self-reported visits to health-care professionals, and a daily checklist was used to record stress levels and illness symptoms. Data on academic performance included the quality of term papers; whether the term paper was handed in early, on time, or late; exam performance; and final course grade.

Overall, Baumeister and Tice found that procrastination produced short-term benefits, but long-term costs. Early in the semester, procrastinating students enjoyed a period of reduced stress and few health problems, while non-procrastinating students who got to work on their papers and projects right away suffered higher levels of stress and health problems during that time period. However, as end-of-semester deadlines approached, this pattern reversed, with procrastinating students experiencing more stress and health symptoms than non-procrastinators. Further, procrastinations’ early advantages were more than offset by later costs. Over the entire semester, the toll in terms of

---

increased stress and negative effects on health was greater for procrastinating students than for non-procrastinators. Further, the performance measures showed that procrastination was consistently associated with lower-quality work. Grades on terms papers and exams were significantly lower for procrastinators than for non-procrastinators. The belief held by some individuals that they do their best work under stress found no support in this study. Instead, the results suggest that postponing work results in lower-quality work, and increases stress and illness. Baumeister and Tice conclude that more often than not, procrastination is self-defeating.

GOAL DISENGAGEMENT

Americans love winners and view “quitters” as “losers.” Accounts of people overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles are frequent topics for television shows, magazine articles, books, and movies. Such stories celebrate the strength of the human spirit and inspire a “can-do,” “never-give-up” attitude toward life’s challenges and hardships. The psychological literature also affirms the virtues of sustained individual effort and often portrays those who give up as helpless and hapless (Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2003). Despite these widely held sentiments, Carver and Scheier (2003) contend that giving up is an important and under-appreciated human strength. They point out that an individual’s journey through life inevitably involves disengagement or letting go of unattainable goals, and that such abandonment is often beneficial. Giving up something that is unattainable prevents us from wasting time following blind alleys and dead ends, and helps avoid the distress that may result from hanging onto goals that cannot be achieved. Carver and Scheier conclude that knowing when to give up versus when to persist should be regarded as a highly adaptive coping skill. This skill was captured in the Don Schlitz song, The Gambler, the lyrics of which say, “You got to know when to hold ’em, know when to fold ’em.”

Many everyday life situations present us with this seemingly simple hold-’em-or-fold-’em question. Should we give up, or keep trying? Should we keep shopping for the “perfect gift” for someone, study another hour for a big exam, continue in a relationship that is going poorly, or should we give it up? The difficulty and emotional consequences of giving up depend heavily on the importance of the goal we are pursuing (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Abandoning a lower level, concrete goal (such as finding the perfect gift) may cause some short-term frustration, but is unlikely to cause major life disruption—at least for most people. However, the decision about whether to give up or keep trying assumes much greater personal significance when goals are self-defining or reflect basic human needs (e.g., trying to preserve an important relationship). Ending a romantic relationship, moving on with life after the death of a loved one, or letting go of a career dream are challenging and highly distressing decisions. Such choices may be fraught with guilt, anxiety, feelings of failure, and despair. The critical question here is, how do we know when disengaging from an important goal is the right thing to do?

Carver and Scheier (1998) argue that the answer to this question is far from clear and involves a difficult dilemma. Both hanging on too long and giving up too soon come with potential price tags. On one hand, the inability to mentally disengage from unattained goals, failures, or losses has been linked to depression and poor adjustment. Research shows that “hanging on” is associated with emotional distress (see Carver & Scheier, 1998, Chapter 12). A person who is unable to get over a lost love, for example, may be both tormented and paralyzed by mental and emotional absorption in the failed relationship. This absorption may prevent the person from getting on with life and developing new relationships. On the other hand, disengaging from goals every time things get difficult or go poorly will certainly undermine success. Important goals are typically challenging and require us to overcome obstacles. Giving up too soon, when a goal is, in fact, attainable with sustained effort, compromises our potential achievements and our sense of competence. Chronic giving up across a variety of life goals is one way of defining “helplessness” (c.f. Seligman, 1975).

As you may imagine, given the differences in people’s personalities and life circumstances, knowing whether or not a goal is attainable for a particular individual is a judgment call. College faculty members confront this issue when they advise students regarding career plans. As psychologists, your textbook authors frequently encounter students who want to become clinical psychologists. Getting accepted to a reputable clinical psychology doctoral program requires (among other things) outstanding undergraduate grades. What should we say to a
student with a 2.5 grade point average? “Hang in there and you might make it,” or “You need to consider another career option”? As advisers and mentors, we are committed to encouraging our students to pursue their goals and dreams, but we also feel obligated to provide them with realistic feedback and counsel. The trouble is, some students with average grades have strong abilities and do go on to productive clinical careers, while some with outstanding grades fail because they lack the personal qualities to become effective clinical psychologists.

Whatever the basis of people’s judgments concerning their ability to achieve important goals, one thing seems clear. Unanticipated events, together with limits in time and resources, require all of us to make choices about which goals to pursue and which to abandon. A recent study suggests these decisions have important emotional consequences. Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, and Carver (2003) were interested in three questions. First, are there differences among individuals in the ease or difficulty with which they are able to disengage from unattainable goals? Second, are these differences related to subjective well-being? Specifically, do people who find it relatively easy to abandon unattainable goals report higher subjective well-being than those who have a more difficult time letting go? Third, does the ability to redirect efforts toward alternative goals offset the negative consequences of abandoning goals that are perceived to be unattainable? In other words, is goal reengagement an adaptive self-regulation strategy when confronted with unattainable goals?

Results from three studies that included college students and adult community members provided affirmative answers to each of these research questions. Measures used in the study included assessment of participants’ general stances toward their difficulty-ease in disengaging from unattainable goals, their difficulty-ease in reengaging themselves in alternative goals, and measures of SWB. Summary findings showed that, regardless of age or specific life circumstances, people who found it easier to disengage from unattainable goals reported higher SWB than those who had difficulty letting go of goals. People who disengaged more easily also reported a greater sense of self-mastery and lower levels of stress and intrusive thoughts about life problems. Goal reengagement (investing in new alternatives) was also found to be significantly related to all measures of SWB.

Overall, these results provide testimony to the beneficial effects of giving up unattainable goals—particularly when people can at the same time reengage themselves in meaningful goals that provide alternative direction and purpose to life. Despite widespread beliefs to the contrary, giving up has an important place in adaptive self-regulation. At the very least, it seems to be a healthier alternative than hanging onto goals that have little or no likelihood of being achieved.

Chapter Summary Questions

1. How do the classic studies by Walter Mischel and more recent studies of college students show the value of self-control for a successful life?
2. Compare and contrast control theory and self-discrepancy theory as models of goal-directed and self-regulated action.
3. Why does planning help us achieve our goals? How may implementation intentions make goal pursuit “automatic” and help conserve self-control resources?
4. How does the study by Brunstein show the dual importance of commitment and confidence for goal progress?
5. From the perspective of control theory, what is the difference between approach goals and avoidance goals?
6. Why are avoidance goals associated with less success and diminished well-being? Discuss the role of monitoring, self-control resources, negative emotions, feelings of competence, and self-imposed goals.
7. What is the difference between the parenting styles associated with the development of approach (promotion) or avoidance (prevention) goal orientations, according to Higgins?
8. How may intergoal facilitation help solve goal-conflict problems? Explain and give an example.
9. According to action identification theory, what is the difference between higher- and lower-order identifications of action and how do these relate to an individual’s self-image?
10. a. What is the “manageable” and “meaningful” trade-off?

b. How might a repressive personality type help explain the association between concrete goals and distress, according to Emmons?

11. How does the rebound effect demonstrate the ironic effect of mental control?

12. How does the interrelationship between the operating process, monitoring process, and mental load explain the ironic effects of mental control?

13. How may autonomously chosen actions help reduce the depletion of self-control resources and the ironic effects of efforts at mental control?

14. What are the major advantages and disadvantages of excuses according to research by Schlenker and his colleagues?

15. What is the difference between thinking “hot” and thinking “cool?”

16. How may “psychological distance” increase our self-control ability?

17. According to research by Tice and Baumeister, what are the short-term advantages but longer-term costs of procrastination?

18. a. What are the two sides of the hanging on versus giving up dilemma regarding personal goals?
   b. What are the well-being benefits of goal disengagement and reengagement?

---

**Key Terms**

- self-control 155
- delay gratification 155
- control theory 156
- self-discrepancy theory 156
- goal intentions 157
- standards, monitoring and strength 157
- implementation intentions 157
- approach goals 160
- avoidance goals 160
- intergoal facilitation 163
- action identification theory 164
- ironic effects of mental control 166
- rebound effect 166
- prescriptive clarity 169
- personal obligation 169
- personal control 169
- hot and cool systems 171
- psychological distance 172

---

**Web Resources**

**Self-Regulation and Self-Determination Theory**

[www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/measures/selfreg.html](http://www.psych.rochester.edu/SDT/measures/selfreg.html)

This is a link from the self-determination theory site at the University of Rochester. It reviews self-regulation from a self-determination theory perspective, provides examples of self-regulation questionnaires, and offers PDF files for self-regulation research articles.

**Ironic Effects of Mental Control**

[www.wjh.harvard.edu/~wegner/ip.htm](http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~wegner/ip.htm)

This is Daniel Wegner’s Harvard University web site. It contains listings of his past and recent studies on the ironic effects of mental control, including the well-known white bear study.

---

**Suggested Readings**


