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NEWSLETTER

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January-March 2019

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Research on the components of well-being can help us choose goals that we'll stick to.

How to Choose Goals That Make You Come Alive



As far as goals go, hiking the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) is one of the more ambitious ones. When you ask people how they did it—something I've been doing for the past two years as a journalist—they don't credit willpower. Instead, they say that pursuing the goal made them feel fully alive.

Perhaps you have heard the advice to choose goals that make you feel alive, but didn't know where to begin. If so, the work of positive psychology pioneer Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania could help.

Seligman might call feeling fully alive "flourishing." To flourish, you need to cultivate five different elements of well-being, ranging from positive emotions to a sense of meaning. As Seligman told me, he believes that the more of these elements you experience as you pursue a goal, the more likely you are to stick with it—whether your goal is to write a novel, start a new career, or just exercise more.

1. Positive emotions

Positive emotions, the first component of flourishing, range from pleasure and comfort to enthusiasm and awe. For example, PCT hiker Andy Dischekenyan described moments of bliss outdoors: "The birdsongs, the crisp air, the wind dancing through the trees, the sun kissing my face as it sets... sleeping under a blanket of a trillion stars."

It was one such moment that helped him through his lowest period on the trail. One night, he was exhausted, in pain, and wanted to stop—but then he found a beautiful campsite. "While watching the sunset, the pain from my knee, my anger and my fears, all washed away. My smile returned. Everything was okay once more," he says.

"Positive emotions can help turn threat-related thoughts ('There's no way I can do this') into optimistic thoughts ('I have the resources to do this')," says Christian Waugh of Wake Forest University. They accomplish this by promoting stress responses that are helpful. For example, as research by Judith Moskowitz and her colleagues has demonstrated, experiencing positive emotions in the midst of stress helps replenish resources that are typically depleted by stress, allowing people to keep up their normal roles and activities.

Positive emotions also promote problem solving and creative thinking, according to Barbara Frederickson and Christine Branigan. They broaden the scope of our attention and inspire novel thoughts and actions, which over time allows us to develop more skills and resources.

So if the route to your goal offers you moments of positive emotion, you might stick to it better. If you are wondering if you should revisit that half-complete novel in your desk drawer, consider whether the act of writing—thinking of the perfect phrase or finishing a chapter—gives you pleasure or satisfaction.

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Be Happier

The Claremont Positivity Center is an online resource that incorporates Positive Psychology and mindfulness self-help techniques to improve employee well-being in the workplace and beyond.

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**Positivity
Center**

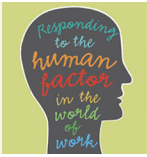
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How to Choose Goals That Make You Come Alive

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2. Engagement

Engagement is the state of flow, an experience when you are completely absorbed and time seems to stand still or pass in a flash. Hiker Mandie Carter describes the flow state in her online journal.

“We gave the trail all we had... I was in a sort of transcendental meditation thing... thoughts were woven together like lace over the fabric of my breathing. My feet made a rhythmic crunch crunch crunch and over top of that was my breath, in, in, ouuut... in, in, ouuut.”

Even during a 20-mile uphill struggle, the miles seemed to pass unnoticed for Mandie. “I can’t really tell you much about this section,” she writes.

The flow state does seem to help our performance “mainly by facilitating the focus of attention for an extended period,” says Brian Bruya, the editor of *Effortless Attention*.

Experiencing flow also encourages us to keep pursuing a goal. “When the activity is difficult and takes a long time to achieve the goal, it helps to experience flow,” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Flow*, told me. He explained: If your goal is to perfect your baseball game and you experience flow from playing baseball, you will continue to play baseball even if a particular game is not enjoyable.

Approach your goals, then, in a way that maximizes your chances of experiencing flow. Flow is most likely to occur when the challenge of what you are doing matches your skill level. If you are a new runner training for a marathon, don’t push yourself to sprint hills on the first day. Wait until you are a more skilled runner for that challenge.

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3. Relationships

Hiker Caleb Miller knows something about relationships on the PCT. He met a woman at mile 0 and married her at mile 445. Their partnership pushed him to hike farther than he had planned. “I didn’t realize how crucial the camaraderie would be, how powerful it is in keeping you going,” he says in the memoir his wife wrote about their hike.

“There is a good deal of research that social support (the tangible, informational, or emotional help) we receive from others is an integral part of reaching one’s goals,” says Shelly Gable of UC Santa Barbara.

A 2008 study demonstrates how social support helps when we encounter hurdles. “We showed that when a friend was actually present, or when participants merely thought of a supportive significant other, a steep hill looked less steep. This suggests that people rely on close others when considering how difficult tackling a given environment might be,” says lead author Simone Schnall.

Consider how to strengthen your connection to others as you pursue your goal: If you want to lose weight, think about joining a support group like Weight Watchers or recruiting friends to join you at healthy restaurants.

4. Meaning

Meaning is belonging to, and serving, something that you believe is bigger than the self. Hiker Natalie Chudacoff, who works as a director at a nonprofit science camp, called the PCT “grad school.” On trail, she says, “I would be learning and living the goals I wanted to have accomplished to make myself a better and more qualified camp director.”

With a couple hundred miles to go in the hike, she had had enough. So she told herself that this part of the hike was “final exams.” “Like grad school, you don’t quit because finals are hard,” she told me. Thinking of her larger purpose—serving the youth who attend her camp—helped her finish.

“Research in psychology shows that meaning is a strong motivating factor,” says Evgeny Osin, of Russia’s National Research University Higher School of Economics.

In yet another study on how we perceive hills, researchers found that people with a greater sense of purpose thought the same hill required less effort to ascend and wasn’t as steep.

So reflect on whether your goal serves a larger purpose. If you want to start your own business, do you believe your product contributes to the greater good of society? Alternatively, think about how you can add meaning to your goal: Will you earmark a percentage of your profits for charity?

5. Accomplishment

In her PCT guidebook, Jackie McDonnell wrote that “the sense of accomplishment is overwhelming” during a PCT hike. She elaborated over email: “The place where we go to sleep is 50 miles from the place where we woke up yesterday morning... And we WALKED here. You can’t help but feel powerful when this is your way of life.”

Where does that sense of accomplishment, success, and mastery that Jackie describes come from? “The main answer is intrinsic motivation,” says Kennon Sheldon of the University of Missouri.

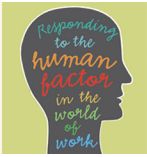
People who have intrinsic motivation, who pursue a goal for its own sake, tend to exhibit more perseverance and resilience, says Patty O’Grady of the University of Tampa. In one study, Sheldon found that “people are most likely to be effective when they pursue goals that either engage their natural interests or express their authentic personal values.”

When you think about why you are pursuing a goal, is your first thought of an intrinsic reward? Do you want to learn Spanish because you find the language beautiful? Or are you learning Spanish for an extrinsic reward, say, the pay raise your company gives to Spanish speakers?

Seligman’s framework may be helpful for thinking about goals, but it is not a magic formula. Mandie, the hiker who experienced flow, left the trail short of her goal, at mile 800. Indeed, psychologists caution that some elements of well-being can work against us. For example, experiencing positive emotion during goal pursuit might make it harder to achieve a goal, because feeling good about our progress can make us reduce our effort.

Many of the PCT hikers I interviewed said the hike was one of the best experiences of their lives. By choosing goals that nourish different aspects of our well-being, the rest of us can hope to feel the same.

Caroline Benner is a former weekend “Today’s Papers” writer for Slate and editorial assistant at Foreign Policy. In 2015, she hiked the first 266 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail, and she is currently researching a book about the trail.



Keeping Your Spirit Healthy

People talk about the importance of keeping their lives in balance. But when it comes down to it, few people really know how to achieve it.

"When you're stressed, taking steps to strengthen your personal integrity can bring you back to a sense of balance that restores a sense of inner peace and harmony," says Brian Luke Seaward, Ph.D., author of *Quiet Mind, Fearless Heart*. "The human spirit is composed of free-flowing energy. But unresolved anger, fear and other negative emotions can choke the spirit by creating stress."

According to Dr. Seaward, you can reduce stress by understanding the unique relationship that exists between less stress and more spirituality in your life.

"For many people, spirituality has been the missing link in strengthening the mind-body-spirit continuum that's the basis of a healthy life," he says. "People who have healthy minds and bodies but still feel stressed or uneasy haven't satisfied their spiritual hunger because it can't be satisfied by material things."

The following strategies can help you change or modify behaviors that increase stress and replace them with behaviors that promote harmony.

Keep everything in perspective

When you're stressed by a particular event, it's easy to lose perspective, particularly of how good your life is overall.

"When you find yourself focusing on the foreground of a problem or a crisis, take a step back and look at it in the context of the big picture of your life," says Dr. Seaward. "Doing so helps you realize that in many areas of your life things are going well."

Establish healthy boundaries

Boundaries let other people know how far they can go before they infringe on your personal integrity. Setting clear boundaries helps minimize misunderstandings between friends, family and coworkers.

Manage anger

Keep anger under control by changing your expectations. Many episodes of anger in day-to-day life are the result of unmet expectations. By lowering your expectations, especially about things you can't control, you can reduce angry and stressful responses. For instance, plan in advance to let go of things you know will drive you crazy, such as traffic delays.

Be thankful

Adopt an attitude of gratitude by directing your thoughts away from negative thought patterns that are common when you're stressed.

"When you're feeling as if nothing is going right, stop and make a list of all the things you're grateful for or take for



granted," says Dr. Seaward. "Start with simple things, like being able to see and breathe. Then move on to personal things, such as family members and your job. Don't stop until you reach 100 items."

Turn off the TV

Prolonged TV viewing increases stress because of violent or disturbing content and the constant visual stimulation.

Forgive others

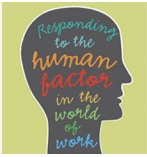
Carrying the weight of a grudge becomes immobilizing over time. But when you forgive someone, you bring light into your heart and the whole world benefits.

Seize the day

Choose one of your unmet personal goals and map out a strategy to make it happen. Fill in the specifics, identify the resources you need and come up with an estimated completion date.

"Human behavior is slow to change, but it can be done," says Dr. Seaward. "Start by selecting one strategy from those above and incorporate it into your life for several weeks. Then try another one for a while. Over time, you'll feel more whole and less stressed because you're consciously seeking balance in your life instead of imbalance."

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A To-Do List for Key Stages of Your Life

To successfully reach your financial goals, a lot depends on what you do and when. Here are just a few ideas young adults can consider at key stages of their life.

You're in High School

Consider earning money outside of your home, whether it's babysitting, lawn mowing, or working in a movie theater or another "real" business. A job can provide a sense of accomplishment and responsibility. It also can be a good opportunity to learn about careers and to "network" with professionals.

Learn the concept of "paying yourself first" — that is, automatically putting some money into savings or investments before you're tempted to spend it. Start small if you have to and gradually build up.

Consider opening a bank account, either on your own or with a parent or other adult. It's a good way to learn about managing money. You also may want to start using a debit card — you can use it to make purchases but you won't pay interest or get into debt because the money is automatically deducted from your bank account.

Take a personal finance class or join an investment club at school.

If you're planning to go to college, learn about your options for saving or borrowing money for what will be a major expense.

If you (and your parents) are comfortable with getting a credit card, you should know that there are cards designed just for teens. One is a credit card with a low credit limit that can keep you from getting deeply in debt. Another is a pre-paid card that comes with parental controls, including spending limits.

You're in College

Realize that as you pay bills and debts on your own you are building a "credit record" that could be important when you apply for a loan or a job in the future. Pay your bills on time...and borrow only what you can repay.

If you decide to get your own credit card, choose carefully. Take your time, understand the risks as well as the rewards and do some comparison shopping. Don't apply for a credit card just because you

received an invitation in the mail or a sales person was offering a free gift on campus.

Protect your Social Security number (SSN), credit card numbers and other personal information from thieves who use someone else's identity to commit fraud. Examples: Use your SSN as identification only if absolutely necessary and never provide it to a stranger. Safeguard your personal information when using the Internet or borrowing a computer provided by your school.

Consider a paying job or even an unpaid internship at a workplace related to a career you're considering.

If possible, set aside money into savings and investments.

Try to take a class in personal finance. Read money-related magazine and newspaper articles.

You're Starting a Career

Keep your credit card and other debts manageable. Maintain a good credit record.

Save money for both short-term and long-term goals. Contribute as much as you can to retirement savings, which often can be used for other purposes, including a first-time home purchase. Take advantage of matching contributions that your employer will put into your retirement savings.

Do your best to stick to a budget and control your spending, especially if you're still paying back student loans or working at an entry-level job.

Although insurance sometimes seems like a waste of money, you only need one accident or catastrophe to wipe you out financially. Think about disability insurance (to replace lost income if you become seriously ill) and health insurance (to cover big medical bills). Check into low-cost or free insurance offered through your employer.



You're Starting a Family

Continue saving and investing money, including in retirement accounts.

If you don't already own your home do some research to see if this is a good option for you. A home purchase can be expensive but it also can be an excellent investment and a source of tax breaks. Check out educational resources for first-time homebuyers.

Make sure you are properly insured, including life, health, disability and home owner's or renter's insurance.

Talk with an attorney about the legal documents you should have to protect your loved ones if you become seriously ill or die. These documents typically include a will, a "durable power of attorney" (giving one or more people the authority to handle personal matters if you become mentally or physically incompetent) and a "living will" (specifying the medical care you want or don't want if you become hopelessly ill and cannot communicate your wishes.)

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