

THE BIG IDEAS

The Self-Control Muscle

You can train it!

Goal Targets

Specific + difficult but possible.

Confidence

In ability and challenges.

Daydreaming

--> Rockin' it.

Goals Aren't All Equal

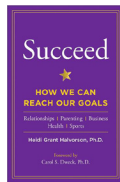
Choose wisely.

Getting Better

vs. Being good.

Visualizing Success

Is it a good idea?



Succeed

How We Can Reach Our Goals

BY HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON · HUDSON STREET PRESS © 2010 · 288 PAGES

“The important thing is that while achieving your goals is a bit more complicated than just doing “Three Things,” it’s not overly complicated, either. In Part 1 of the book, “Get Ready,” I’ll talk about the key principles of goal-setting that seem to be universally true, whether you’re pursuing goals at work, in relationships, or for self-development. In Part 2, “Get Set,” you’ll learn about the different kinds of goals we set for ourselves, focusing on the few distinctions that seem to matter the most. I’ll show you how to choose the goal that will work best for *you* personally in *your* situation. And you’ll learn how to instill the most beneficial goals in your children, students, and employees. In Part 3, “Go,” I’ll take you step by step through the most common reasons why we fail to reach our goals once we’ve started pursuing them. And you’ll learn effective, often simple and easy-to-implement strategies for avoiding these pitfalls in the future.

In the last decade or two, social psychologists have come to know a lot about how goals work. *Succeed* is my attempt to take that knowledge out of the academic journals and handbooks and spread it around a bit more so that it can do some good.”

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson from *Succeed*

[Heidi Grant Halvorson](#) is one of the world’s leading researchers on goal setting. She’s also funny, smart, and down-to-earth.

Succeed delivers on its sub-title, providing a lot of Big Ideas on “How We Can Reach Our Goals.” The book is REALLY (!) good--mixing theory with super-practical, *scientifically* grounded advice.

We’ll barely scratch the surface in this quick Note. It’s one of those books where I wish I had 60 pages instead of 6 pages to share all the goodness. But, alas, that would kind of defeat the purpose, eh? :)

I’m excited to pull out a handful of my favorite Big Ideas that we can start applying today. If you’re feelin’ it, I think you’ll LOVE the book. (Buy it on Amazon [here](#).)

For now, let’s jump in! :)

THE SELF-CONTROL MUSCLE

“If you want more self-control, you can get more. And you get more self-control the same way you get bigger muscles—you’ve got to give it regular workouts. Recent research has shown that engaging in daily activities such as exercising, keeping track of your finances or what you are eating—or even just remembering to sit up straight every time you think of it—can help you develop your overall self-control capacity. For example, in one study, students who were assigned to (and stuck to) a daily exercise program not only got physically healthier, but they

“All of the work you will read about here sheds light on the most basic processes of human motivation and has been held to the highest standards of research. That’s what makes this book so exceptional.”

~ Carol Dweck

"Stopping before you start is an excellent strategy to keep your need for self-control to a minimum."

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

"It's also important when you set goals to make them difficult, while still being realistic. You want to challenge yourself and set the bar high, b/c challenges really get the motivational juices flowing, while avoiding goals that are more or less improbable."

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

also became more likely to wash dishes instead of leaving them in the sink, and less likely to impulsively spend money."

Self-control: We can build it up just like we build up our muscles. AND, when we build it up in one area it enhances self-control in other areas!

That's incredibly cool.

Let's take advantage of little opportunities to train by giving ourselves mini-workouts throughout the day. Whether it's resisting the unhealthy food, breathing when we're stuck in traffic, sitting up straight as often as we remember, exercising x times per week, eating more veggies, ...

Whatever it is, go out and rock it! And, remember that the more energy you put into developing self-control in one area, the more it's going to benefit other areas!!

GOAL TARGETS: DIFFICULT BUT POSSIBLE

"Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, two eminent organizational psychologists, have spent several decades studying the extraordinary effectiveness of setting specific and difficult goals. In more than one thousand studies conducted by researchers across the globe, they've found that goals that spell out *exactly* what needs to be accomplished, and that set the bar for achievement *high*, result in far superior performance than goals that are vague or that set the bar too low. And this is true regardless of whether the goal is something you adopt on your own, something you are assigned to complete, or something that you develop jointly with your parent, teacher, boss, or coworkers."

Well, there ya go.

Over 1,000 (!!!) studies have been done around the world to scientifically establish the fact that we perform better when we set SPECIFIC goals that *challenge* us.

Begs the question: What kind of goals are *you* setting these days? Specific and challenging?!

Keep this in mind: "Of course, you shouldn't set goals that are not realistic or are impossible to reach. *Difficult but possible* is the key. That's because more difficult goals cause you to, often unconsciously, increase your effort, focus, and commitment to the goal; persist longer; and make better use of the most effective strategies."

Reminds me of [Tal Ben-Shahar](#)'s wisdom from his great book [Happier](#) (see Notes) where he tells us we want to set "stretch goals"—which are right in between our "comfort" and "panic" zones—where we stretch enough so that we're out of our comfort zones, but not SO far that we snap!

Back to you: What's your #1 goal right now?

Let's get specific. :)

My #1 Challenging Goal right now is: _____

(If you need to go take some action in the direction of that goal, btw, please go for it. We'll wait for you. :)

P.S. For those curious souls, my #1 Goal right now is: *To finish PN-II (another 100 Notes on awesome optimal living classics (PDFs + MP3s + PNTVs)) by August 31st, 2011. This is #47 and it's March 28th as I type this. So, I have 5 months to get the next 53 done (+ all 100 of the TVs). This is a specific, difficult but possible goal that motivates me and keeps me focused!!*

Wish me luck as I send best regards on you crushing your #1 specific and challenging goal! :)

CONFIDENCE: IN ABILITY AND CHALLENGES

"Ultimately, people who think that reaching their goal will be a breeze simply aren't prepared for what lies ahead of them, and they can be devastated when the dreams that they've enjoyed dreaming about so much don't actually come true."

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

"Women who imagined that the path to weight loss would be easy lost an average of twenty-four pounds less than those who imagined themselves having a hard time resisting temptation. Oettingen and her colleagues have found the same pattern when looking at students in search of high-paying jobs after college, at single individuals looking to form lasting romantic relationships, and at seniors recovering from hip replacement surgery. No matter who they are and what they are trying to do, we find that successful people not only have confidence that they will eventually succeed, but are *equally* confident that they will have a tough time getting there."

To re-cap: Successful people are confident that they will be able to achieve their goals AND they are confident that there will be plenty of challenges to overcome in the process.

This is a REALLY (!) Big Idea.

And, when I say REALLY (!), I mean ***REALLY* (!!!!!) BIG.**

I've read a fair number of goal setting and general self-dev books at this point and I can't EVER remember reading one that referenced these studies. Part of a much longer chat about the over-emphasis on the power of intention and vision boards and all that jazz (see more below). For now, let's remember that "successful people not only have confidence that they will eventually succeed, but are *equally* confident that they will have a tough time getting there."

And, on that note, let's check in on our prior specific and challenging goal and add some obstacles we *know* we're going to face.

This is My #1 Goal: _____

These are some of the challenges I'm going to face en route to rockin' it: _____

Nice.

P.S. For those curious souls, the challenges I'm going to face include: *The time is going to go *really* fast. If I fall behind, I won't hit my goal of creating 100 Notes for PN-II by August 31st. And, I definitely won't hit my goal unless I force myself to read and write every day—ideally not allowing myself to get online before noon so I don't get distracted and lose a day.*

DAYDREAMING —> ROCKIN' IT

"Then what is the best way to set goals so that you will reach them, without getting stuck daydreaming? The optimal strategy to use when setting a goal seems to be to think *positively* about how it will be when you achieve your goal, while thinking *realistically* about what it will take to get there. Oettingen refers to this as *mental contrasting*—first you imagine attaining your goal, and then you reflect on the obstacles that stand in the way. If you want to get a high-paying job after college, start by imagining yourself accepting an offer at a top firm, and then think about what stands between you and that offer—namely, all the other really outstanding candidates that will be applying for jobs. Kind of makes you want to send out a lot of applications, doesn't it? That's called feeling the *necessity to act*—it's a psychological state that is crucial for achieving a goal. Daydreaming about how great it will be to land that job or fall in love with that special someone you've had your eye on can be a lot of fun, but it won't get you anywhere. Mental contrasting turns wishes and day-dreams into reality, by bringing into focus what you will need to do to make it happen."

"If you believe that you are having a hard time reaching your goal because you lack the necessary ability, and that you can't do much to change that ... well, there's no way to put this nicely: you are wrong. Effort, planning, persistence, and good strategies are what it really takes to succeed."

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

"There are boatloads of very successful, very unhappy people all around us. That's because they have successfully pursued goals that don't actually fulfill their basic needs as human beings—the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy."

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

That's another super saucy Idea. Let's unpack it a bit.

First, *mental contrasting*. It's the psychological phrase for imagining our ideal outcome and then contrasting that with all the things that will get in the way of us achieving it. We basically did this in the prior Idea but let's go ahead and do it again for your goal right now.

Imagine how *awesome* it's going to feel to crush your goal. You achieved it. YES!!! Nice work.

* pat on the back *

Now, contrast that with what stands in the way of you achieving that goal. Yep, there's that challenge. And that one. And that one. And don't forget that one...

Sweet. Mental contrasting done.

As you enjoy the pleasant feeling of imagined achievement and the sobering clarity of the challenges involved, don't you feel the *necessity to act* brewing?!? (Me, too. :)

How 'bout a new rule: For every goal we set for ourselves, let's commit to making it specific and (appropriately) challenging, then let's do our mental contrasting: imagining attaining the goal AND imagining all the obstacles.

Then let's take persistent action, confident in our ability to achieve our goals as we get a little better every day facing the inevitable ups and downs!! :)

NOT ALL GOALS ARE CREATED EQUAL

"As I mentioned earlier, not all goals lead to lasting feelings of true satisfaction and well-being, and that's because not all goals satisfy our needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Which ones do? In general, goals that are about making, supporting, or strengthening relationships do. So do goals that focus on personal growth, physical health, or self-acceptance—addressing your shortcomings or, if they can't be helped, simply coming to terms with them. Goals that have to do with contributing to your community or helping others also fulfill these needs.

Here are the goals that *aren't* going to help you achieve lasting well-being: becoming famous, seeking power over others, or polishing your public image. Any goal that is related to obtaining other people's validation and approval or external signs of self-worth isn't going to do it for you, either. Accumulating wealth for its own sake also won't lead you to real happiness (this is not to say you shouldn't care about money at all, just that being rich isn't a sure ticket to a happy life)."

Love it.

This is another theme we're exploring often in PN-II. Halvorson references [Edward Deci](#), the researcher who delineates the science of intrinsic vs. extrinsic goals in his classic book, [Why We Do What We Do](#). Check out the Notes for more goodness.

Back to you!

Where are *you* focusing YOUR energy? On developing relationships, personal growth and making a contribution? Or, on going after fame, wealth or beauty?

Choose wisely!!! :)

And while you do that, keep this gem from Halvorson in mind: "All that glitters isn't gold. Goals that are all about obtaining external validation of self-worth—like being popular, famous, or rich—not only won't make you truly happy, but will actively diminish your sense of well-being, by interfering with the pursuit of goals that will really benefit you. If you have goals like these in your life, it's time to rid yourself of them."

*"If you choose get-better goals, you have greater success *because* you enjoy the process of getting better. So sometimes you really can have your cake and eat it, too."*

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

*"The bottom line is, whenever possible, try to turn your goals from *being good* to *getting better*."*

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

"Metaphorically speaking, if your unconscious mind can hold information equivalent to a NASA supercomputer, your conscious mind can hold roughly the contents of a Post-it note."

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

GETTING BETTER VS. BEING GOOD

"My favorite piece of advice by far for dealing with difficulty is to make sure you think about your goal in terms of *getting better*, rather than *being good*. As you'll recall from Chapter 3, when we are focused on personal growth and development, on making progress rather than on proving ourselves, we deal with difficulty far more gracefully. We tend to see setbacks as informative, rather than as signs of personal failure. We don't worry as much about the likelihood of success because we know that even if we never do it perfectly, we will certainly improve. (And getting better is, after all, the goal.)"

Getting better vs. being good.

Those are two different orientations we can have in life and in goal setting. (They roughly map over [Carol Dweck's](#) "growth vs. fixed" mindsets. Check out the Notes on [Mindset](#) for more goodness on that!)

The basic idea: When we approach life with a "being good" mindset, we're constantly trying to prove ourselves. We're paranoid that any blunder we make might be the evidence that shows the world how messed up we are. So, we avoid taking action and freak out when we inevitably DO mess up. Eek.

On the other hand, when we approach life with a "getting better" mindset, we KNOW we're not perfect, we're not trying to prove ourselves, and we embrace challenges as they provide the path to growth—which, rather than looking good, is our primary goal. Setbacks are simply data points for us, not signals we're unalterably flawed.

How do YOU tend to show up? Check in on that.

And know this: "If you focus on growth instead of validation, on making progress instead of proving yourself, you are less likely to get depressed because you won't see setbacks and failures as reflecting your own self-worth. And you are less likely to *stay* depressed, because feeling bad makes you want to work harder and keep striving. You get up off the couch, dust off the potato chip crumbs, and get busy getting better."

Amen.

Here's to focusing on *getting better* rather than *being good*!

WHAT ABOUT "VISUALIZING SUCCESS"?

"What about "visualizing success"? I won't name names, but it seems like there are an awful lot of self-help books out there telling people that if they just picture what they want in their minds, it will somehow happen. That would be great if it were true, but scientifically speaking, there really isn't much evidence for it. On the other hand, visualization can be very helpful, if you imagine the steps you will take in order to succeed, rather than the success itself. Mentally simulating the process of achieving the goal, rather than the hoped-for outcome, not only results in a more optimistic outlook, but in greater planning and preparation. Picture yourself doing what it takes to succeed, and you will soon find yourself believing that you can. The best part is, you'll be absolutely right."

This is really powerful stuff. (And I love how politely Halvorson puts it. :)

Visualization.

As Halvorson tells us, there are an awful lot of self-help books out there telling people to visualize the OUTCOMES they want to create in their lives. (And then, of course, creating a vision board fully documenting it all.)

That approach sells in a culture looking for quick fixes and easy solutions.

"Just like goals, not all plans are created equal. An effective plan is one that spells out exactly what will be done, and where, and how."

~ Heidi Grant Halvorson

But it isn't very effective. What would be a LOT more effective would be visualizing the ACTIONS you're going to take to achieve your goals.

As Halvorson advises: "Don't visualize success. Instead, visualize the steps you will take in order to succeed. Just picturing yourself crossing the finish line doesn't actually help you get there—but visualizing how you run the race (the strategies you will use, the choices you will make, the obstacles you will face) not only will give you greater confidence, but also leave you better prepared for the task ahead. And that is definitely realistic optimism."

But that's only part of the problem. As we discussed above, all goals aren't good for us. And, the fact is that most gurus telling us to create vision boards, get us focused on the WRONG goals.

So, in addition to moving from visualizing outcomes to visualizing action steps, it would be wise to take a close look at your vision board and see how much of the stuff on it is a representation of the EXTRINSIC goals (like wealth/fame/beauty) you think will make you happy.

If your vision board is packed with huge mansions (wealth), you on Oprah (fame), and hot people walking on beaches (beauty), you may want to think about throwing it away.

Those are the WRONG goals.

To repeat: we scientifically know that disproportionately focusing on that stuff does *not* lead to happiness; in fact, research shows that focusing on those extrinsic goals will make you significantly less psychologically stable than peeps who focus on intrinsic goals like deep relationships, personal growth and contributing to their communities.

So, here's to visualizing the steps we can take to deepen our relationships, live with more virtue, and make contributions to our communities! :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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[Mindset](#)

[Why We Do What We Do](#)

[Happier](#)

[The How of Happiness](#)

About the Author of "Succeed"

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Heidi Grant Halvorson, PhD, is a motivational psychologist and researcher. She writes about the scientifically-tested strategies we can use to be more effective reaching our goals at work and in our personal lives. She is also the co-editor of the academic handbook, "The Psychology of Goals," a regular contributor to the BBC World Service's "Business Daily," an expert blogger for *Fast Company* and *Psychology Today*, and a guest blogger for *Harvard Business Review*. Her website is www.heidigranthalvorson.com. (from HuffingtonPost.com)

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.