

implementation intentions instructions: reaching our goals more successfully



when to use implementation intentions?

Implementation intentions help us reach our goals more successfully. The companion handout "*Implementation intentions background ...*" gives introductory information about these important tools. This kind of intention is typically best used when there is a clear, strong goal intention – we definitely want to achieve a goal that means a good deal to us – and also a fair amount of challenge in achieving the goal. Goals we're half-hearted about and goals that are straightforward to attain are not particularly good subjects for implementation intentions. Implementation intentions come into their own when the goal somebody is aiming for is quite difficult for them to achieve. As Gollwitzer and Sheeran (2006) pointed out in their meta-analysis "*Implementation intentions appear to have stronger effects for people with psychological problems compared to the other groups ... This finding suggests that forming implementation intentions is especially beneficial to goal attainment among people who have difficulties with regulating their behavior.*" And in their more recent 2008 paper they highlighted that "*Implementation intention effects are stronger when self-regulatory problems beset goal striving, and when if-then planning is supported by strong, activated goal intentions.*" If commitment to a goal is still tentative, it's probably more sensible to look at whether this commitment can be boosted first before initiating an implementation intention. See, for example, ideas on increasing motivation from self determination theory, motivational interviewing, and mental contrasting.

how to set up the first "if situation Y is encountered ... " section

So if one has chosen a clear, strong goal intention, how do we start setting up implementation intentions? Gollwitzer and Sheeran's 2008 paper is particularly helpful for these practical details. As has been pointed out in the companion "*Implementation intentions background ...*" handout, there seem to be two main categories of difficulty blocking the success of goal intentions – failing to get started and getting derailed once one has got started. So for failing to get started, three common examples are 1.) forgetting to act. 2.) not choosing a good opportunity. 3.) having second thoughts at a critical moment. For getting derailed once started, common examples are 4.) giving in to temptations. 5.) slipping back into bad habits. 6.) giving up when distressed or in a "bad mood". Implementation intentions work by predicting which of these (or other) kinds of difficulty are likely to be important in any given case.

An obvious way to predict which type of difficulty might be relevant in any given situation is to look back at previous attempts to achieve this (or similar) goals. What has got in the way in the past? Is it sensible to use implementation intentions to tackle this previously experienced block? The types of difficulty usually reported by others trying to reach this goal may also suggest targets for implementation intentions. Imagining the journey from one's current situation to the desired goal can sometimes throw up further ideas about likely roadblocks. It's fine to work with more than one implementation intention. For example, in the "*Physical activity in women*" study (Stadler, Oettingen et al. 2009), participants were asked to write down answers to three questions "1.) *When and where does the obstacle occur, and what can I do to overcome or circumvent the obstacle?;* 2.) *When and where is an opportunity to prevent the obstacle from occurring, [Cont.]*

and what can I do to prevent it from occurring?; and 3.) When and where is a good opportunity for me to act on my wish, and what would this action be? In the appendix to the 2008 Gollwitzer and Sheeran paper they discuss difficulties that are likely to occur at particular times of day or week, that are signalled by particular events occurring, and that are linked with specific thoughts, emotions, or physical states.

how to set up the second " ... then I will initiate behaviour Z" section

The examples from the successful Stadler et al physical activity study also illustrate the initiating of a response behaviour when triggered by a predicted obstacle. So for each important difficulty one has identified that might get in the way of achieving and maintaining one's goal intention, one now wants to come up with an appropriate, realistic, effective response. Again one might choose the response because it has worked well for you in the past, or because you know it has worked for others and you suspect it might help you. Ideas you have read or heard about may be relevant. Brainstorming a list of possible responses can also be useful in suggesting potential directions. It might be good as well to talk to a friend or health professional or other "expert" about behaviours that could help deal with the predicted roadblocks.

how to use the implementation intention once it is ready

Make sure the implementation intentions are set up in an "if ... then ..." format – this seems to make them more effective. Write them down – "If situation Y is encountered (e.g. a particular time or event or feeling, etc), then I will initiate behaviour Z (e.g. reminding oneself, shifting one's attention, being mindful, relaxing, becoming active, etc)." In the Stadler research "Participants were encouraged to practice the self regulation technique (the implementation intention) on their own each day, both in writing, using their diary, and mentally throughout the day." We're working to set up semi-automatic habit patterns. This can be hugely helpful. Experiment with writing your implementation intentions down each day. Maybe put them in a place where you can see them regularly. Try daily visualising relevant possible roadblocks and imagine yourself dealing with them successfully using your pre-planned responses. The goal you've chosen is one that is personally genuinely important to you. It's really worth achieving. Implementation intentions can make all the difference to whether you get there or not. Work with them. They're very useful tools.

Gollwitzer, P. M. and P. Sheeran (2006). Implementation intentions and goal achievement: A meta-analysis of effects and processes. Advances in Experimental Social Psychology. **38**: 69-119.

Gollwitzer, P. M. and P. Sheeran (2008). Implementation intentions. Health behavior constructs: Theory, measurement and research. Cancer control and population sciences, National Institutes of Health: National Cancer Institute.

Stadler, G., G. Oettingen, et al. (2009). "Physical activity in women: effects of a self-regulation intervention." Am J Prev Med **36**(1): 29-34.
