

Asking yourself how many times you'll skip the gym is the best motivation to go

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We all set goals for ourselves that we often do not meet. However, according to new research from Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM), honestly asking yourself what you won't do is the key to successfully meeting your goal.

Most people set goals for themselves and specific aims, like how many times you attend the gym, are often more effective than vague goals like 'do your best'. Dr Mirjam Tuk and Dr Bram van den Bergh from Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) and Prof. Sonja Prokopec from ESSEC Business School in Singapore wanted to find out more about how people determine their goal levels and investigate how people can be influenced to set more ambitious goal levels.

According to Dr Mirjam Tuk: "When you want to achieve more ambitious goals, it is more effective to think about how many times you will not work towards your goal. So think about how many times you want to skip the gym this week. You will end up going more often."

The researchers asked participants to set specific goal levels for a variety of activities. This question was always framed in one of two ways. Participants either indicated how many goal-consistent acts they planned to do, or how many they planned to skip. For example, students were asked to indicate how many hours they planned to study for a course versus how many hours they planned to skip studying for that course. A different set of students was asked how many vegetable bites they would plan to eat versus skip eating, and yet another group of participants was asked how many different fundraising tasks they would want to do versus forego in order to raise money for charity.

They found that students plan to study more when asked how many study hours they would skip – rather than spend – and that students plan to eat more vegetables, and actually do eat more, when asked how many they would forego, rather than consume. They found that research participants plan to work on more fundraising tasks and raise more money when asked how many of these tasks they would forego versus how many they plan to do.

According to Dr Bram van den Bergh: "It is of vital importance for individuals and also for many organisations to get people to reach more ambitious goals – such as saving more, working more efficiently, eating more healthily and exercising more. This study provides evidence for a highly effective nudge that prompts people to set more ambitious goals which in turn also increases their performance.

"Public policy-making often aims to improve well-being by encouraging people to save more, exercise more, and eat more healthily. The default approach to goal setting is thinking about how many goal-directed opportunities you want to engage in, for example how many times to go to the gym; and how much of one's discretionary income to save. Our research shows that the exact opposite consideration – like how many times to skip the gym – is much more effective."

The paper has been published in the Journal of Consumer Research under the title do versus don't: the impact of framing on goal-level setting.

For more information, a copy of the research paper, or to speak with the researchers, contact Kate Mowbray at BlueSky PR on Kate@bluesky-pr.com or call +44 710022871