

The Art of Compliance

“Baseball is 90% mental; the other half is physical.”

The late, great Yogi Berra said that. You can easily replace "baseball" with "fitness," "relationships" or even "life itself"; the quote still applies. Sustained success in any walk of life requires you to be a master of your "Inner Game." With that in mind, let's dive into the psychology behind why you continually fail to achieve your fitness goals, and how to fix those problems.

The first problem may lie in the goal itself.

1) Set the Right Goal

First & foremost, you need to be honest with yourself in determining your true goal. You need to be absolutely sure that pursuing this goal will improve your wellbeing & happiness. If it does, it's easy to justify aligning your actions to meet your goal, because you know you will be better off because of it.

By pairing your goals with your quality of life, you're introducing another form of control over your own wellbeing. This creates an internal locus of control: by pursuing this goal, YOU control your own happiness. Research finds people with an internal locus of control are much more successful at achieving their goals & improving their wellbeing than people who feel like their happiness is dictated by circumstance or environment. So take control.

Secondly, be realistic. The kind folks at Harvard University wrote a review on Effective Goal Setting and noted large detrimental effects in setting goals that are inconsistent with the subject's abilities (i.e. unrealistic). This should be obvious: you can't expect to go from couch potato to pro bodybuilder in a week. You also shouldn't patronize yourself with goals that are "too simple," either. There's a sweet spot.

Don't get caught up in the Ricky Bobby mentality: if you ain't first, you're last. This sets you up for failure. Why? Not only is the goal unrealistic, it's performance-based. These type of goals are inherently ego-driven. As a result, you're much more prone to finding short cuts to your end-point because you simply want to get it over with. People with this type of goal are also much more likely to revert to their old habits as soon as the going gets tough, especially if their goal is too unrealistic in the first place.

I've personally changed my goal from "be the best bodybuilder in the world, as soon as possible" to "be the best bodybuilder you can be, and show the world when you're ready." As a result, I'm enjoying the most success I've ever experienced (just look at the pretty little table on my home page).

This is called a "Growth mindset," which is the type of thinking that has been shown to result in the most sustained success in any walk of life. When you prioritize the process & personal growth involved with improving instead of being obsessed with the end-point itself, you remove needless pressure.

Joe Maddon fostered this exact mentality with the Chicago Cubs, and you know how that ended up. Take pride in your consistency; view failure as a learning opportunity; and to quote the man himself, "never let the pressure exceed the pleasure."

Speaking of pressure, the deadlines tied to performance goals can needlessly induce high levels of stress. Chronic stress induces heightened levels of cortisol, which hinders your performance, recovery & effectiveness of your diet. Not to sound morbid, but constant stress also causes people to die sooner. A key determinant of reaching your goal is... well, being alive in the first place.

The success you experience from a growth mindset can also be explained by the Zeigarnik Effect, which states that people are more engaged in uncompleted tasks versus completed tasks. Expecting a reward for your efforts undermines this effect. By setting a performance goal, you're expecting the reward of reaching that specific goal. This actually reduces your likelihood of achieving the goal in the first place.

With a growth mindset, you're constantly using the Zeigarnik Effect to your advantage. The process never stops; you're never "finished" with becoming better at something. There's always room for improvement, which fosters more improvement.

Once you've adopted this new goal & new mindset, you have to ensure that all of your efforts support this new goal.

2) Fortify It

There are a number of ways to fortify your goals to help keep you accountable to them. One of the most obvious ways is through giving yourself an incentive to complete the goal. This is different than a reward, though they are often tied together. Since we're trying to avoid the negative impacts of a singular reward, you have to adjust your incentives accordingly. You can view this in the same light as how you changed your goal.

In our context, the incentive is the result itself. Instead of "rewarding" yourself with a cheat meal (discussed later) after a successful week of dieting, you should view your newfound progress as incentive to keep sticking to your diet. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This is why keeping data, whether it be tracking your diet, training or body composition, leads to greater success. It's not about obsessing over the numbers; it's another form of control. You have tangible evidence of what actions deliver you to your goals. As you learned above, this internal control leads to greater adherence & success. If your goal is truly aligned with your happiness & wellbeing, this should be a no-brainer.

Social support is also crucial for sustained success. Time and again, the research shows that social support improves your ability to stick with your diet & exercise routine. So announce your intentions to the world, or at least the core group of people you associate with the most.

This is another tactic I've personally used with great success. I've announced my own intentions of competing in a bodybuilding show via Facebook & face-to-face interaction. The result? Most people understand that the goal is something that would make me a better person and have embraced my decision. True friends & family are way more accommodating than you'd imagine.

You can expect some initial push-back & confusion, but after the dust settles, you'll be able to see who truly has your best interest in mind. The ones that understand will come to embrace it. Disregard the opinions of the ones that don't. Remember, YOU control your own happiness, not them. If they don't want you to be happy in the first place, you should probably cut ties or limit your interactions with these people in the first place. ㄒ_(ツ)_ㄒ

Yet another way to fortify your goal is through empowering yourself. If it's not already apparent, belief in yourself & your ability to achieve your goal is crucial. Researchers call this the Pygmalion Effect: your belief about the outcome of the goal is highly tied with your ability to reach that goal in the first place. If you believe you will fail, you probably will. If you believe you will succeed, you probably will. This is a conscious choice, and a simple one at that.

Constantly remind yourself that you will succeed. This is even easier when you've set a proper goal, since the measure of success is your own personal rate of progress. Keeping data that shows how far you've come provides proof of this that you can see with your own eyes. You can also use tactics like journaling & imagery to continue to foster your inner belief.

To quote Kevin Garnett, "ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE." Believe it.

Now you realize your results are your greatest incentive, you've alerted your social group that you're all-in on your goal, and you've committed to believing in yourself. Now how do you start attacking your goal?

3) "Just Do It" (BIG)

Nike had it right all along. Research by McGraw et al. shows that "just doing it" is likely the hardest part when you're trying to make real change. Why?

A) Procrastination. Not only is it easier to simply say "I'll do it tomorrow," your brain literally finds ways to simulate real, productive work by substituting it with empty tasks. This explains why your kitchen suddenly gets squeaky-clean every time a new difficult task pops up in your life.

B) Humans are terrible at projecting their future emotions. We have a really big problem with what's known as Affective Forecasting. We suck at differentiating our current feelings & emotions from our future feelings & emotions. And unfortunately, our thoughts tend to become irrationally negative when presented with a new task: we overestimate how negative (or positive) the experience may be, and drastically overestimate how long the experience will impact our lives.

This very article is a great example of this entire process. I spent a few hours worrying about how I'm going to fit all of this information into something that's readable & coherent. And also, you know, writing is hard, and what not...

But I finally just told myself, "start writing, and the rest will fall in line." And wouldn't ya know? I was right!

Every task follows this pattern. The "worst-case scenario" is all in your head; when you know this, you can power through the learning curve and find yourself on the easy side of things in a matter of hours (or days).

It's also wise to jump right in and make as many changes as you can manage at a single time. None of this "start slow" bullshit. It all ties back to Range Frequency Theory.

Range what? This is a theory that basically explains how we view the magnitude of something in relative terms. We base things on our prior reference point of that specific thing. For example, if you only have \$15, then spending \$10 is a large expense. However, if you have \$1000, \$10 doesn't seem like quite as much money to spend anymore.

The same goes for lifestyle changes: if you make repeated small changes, you're repeatedly setting a new reference point. By comparison, each change you make will feel large & potentially overwhelming. You can circumvent this theory by making one big change all at once, so as to only experience this change in reference point one time.

There will be trial & error in the beginning, but when you start big, things only get better. When you start small, things only appear to "get harder" as time goes on. Studies find that making one shift, whether big or small, results in the same amount of perceived effort & pain. Why not get all of that effort out of the way at once? The longer you spend within a specific framework, the more time you have to turn those practices into habits. At that point, these new practices become your new reference point.

Starting big also encourages more results on the front end; this is especially beneficial for dieting, since people who lose more weight in the beginning phases of the diet tend to be motivated by that change & end up being more successful in the long run.

Notice I said "as many changes as you can manage." This is going to be different for everyone. While most people are way too conservative in this regard, there's an upper limit to this as well. This optimal amount of change is determined by your motivation level. When you put the prior tips in place, your motivation should already be higher, which can allow you to make more changes. Just don't overwhelm yourself.

The key to not being overwhelmed? Keeping your willpower topped off.

4) Don't Deplete Your Willpower

Willpower can be thought of as a fixed resource, like the amount of gas in a car or the amount of money in your savings account. Every conscious decision you make drains this resource. This is known as Ego Depletion. If this wasn't the case, then we'd all be able to consciously choose to eat less each & every day without any problems. But things aren't that simple.

Ego Depletion supports the idea that hunger is the biggest determinant of a successful diet; if you have a stressful day at work, and spend the remaining "allowance" of will power on fighting your hunger, it's only a matter of time before your instincts kick in and you're standing in front of an open freezer at 2 AM with a spoon in a pint of Ben & Jerry's. We've all been there.

The main point here is that conscious effort is the only thing standing between our goals & our primal instincts, and that conscious effort can easily be used up. In order to circumvent this, you need to remove the conscious effort from as many things as possible & set your lifestyle on "autopilot."

The first tactic would be to outsource some of the decision making altogether. This one of the reasons why hiring a coach can be beneficial: you've offloaded the decision making to another person. You won't have to call the shots anymore; the willpower you would've spent on micromanaging the "perfect diet" or "perfect workout plan" can now be saved & allocated to higher priority things in your life.

Odds are any coach worth their salt already has a sound plan in mind to get you to your goal in the most efficient way possible, which saves you the trouble of having to come up with the plan in the first place. Let's be honest: diving right in with no plan is likely worse than not starting in the first place.

This also has implications for tip #3 above: remember Affective Forecasting? That negative forecasting is amplified when you have no experience with a certain situation. If you have the help of someone who has "walked the walk," so to speak, their experience can partially substitute for your own. They know what it takes to achieve your goal, and you're trusting in them to help you do the same. You're no longer flying blind.

The second tactic would be to remove as much conscious decision making from the process as you can. Pre-make your meals so that when a meal time rolls around, you already know exactly what you're going to eat. Schedule your workouts at if they are meetings at work: you know you have to show up. In either scenario, the decision is already made for you. There's no mental tug of war, and you're not spending any of your valuable willpower on mundane tasks anymore. Over time, these practices become habits, and habits literally require no willpower; they're second nature.

While all of these tips may paint a rosy picture that your life can become a perfect symphony of habits & that you can maintain a laser-like focus on your primary goal at all times, we have to be aware of the fact that we're not robots. Our priorities change throughout life; it's not fair to expect that we can pursue the same goal with the same vigor for the rest of our lives.

This means that the best way to ensure that we stay sane during the pursuit of our goal is to cycle our efforts. Even professional athletes have an off-season; you should too.

I call this the "Competitive Cycle": there are periods where you are more aggressive & strict with your lifestyle ("sprinting"), accompanied by periods where you're slightly less strict ("coasting"). This is not to say you throw out your goal or your habits entirely; you're simply shifting your priorities for a certain amount of time to allow you to restock your willpower.

For example, say your overall goal is to improve your body composition as much as possible (this is pretty much everyone's goal). This means you want to gain muscle mass & lose body fat. You dive right into a period where you're as strict as possible in order to make the most progress toward your goal. After a while, let's say 12 weeks or so, you realize you've made substantial progress toward your goal. You now know exactly what it takes to get the results you want. At this point, you can either keep going (so long as you're comfortable with it), or you can

take your foot off the gas a bit and maintain what you've earned. Not completely regress to your old habits, mind you. Maintenance takes work, but that's not the point of this post.

Anyways, by doing the latter, you're allowing yourself a period of time to be "normal," as people like to call it. You can afford to go out with your friends for a few drinks more often; you can have dessert every now and again and not worry about it. This will allow you to recover some of that willpower you will inevitably spend during the time you spent aggressively pursuing your goal. Think of it as increasing your savings account: you'll be able to spend more of that resource the next time you want to sprint.

The explanation is intuitive: people work harder when they know a "break" is around the corner. This goes for dieting, exercise, or any form of productive work. Note that this period of time shouldn't be defined arbitrarily; it should be based on the amount of progress you've made. If you're experiencing the best progress of your entire life & there's nothing on the horizon that will shift your priorities, there's no reason to stop simply because "my program says I should only be working hard for 8 weeks." You should squeeze out every last drop of progress, and then take a chunk of time to decompress & assess your results. Rinse & repeat.

The best part of this approach is that it provides you with valuable experience. You've seen exactly what it takes to get you closer to your end goal; the next time you choose to ramp things up, you have a set of "best practices" to employ. This is yet another form of internal control: YOU know what works best for YOU. Next time, you might not even need to hire a coach (and I'm saying this as a coach). The entire point is creating autonomy.

5) #KnowledgelsPower

The final way to overcome an obstacle is simply knowing the real reason why that obstacle is harmful in the first place. Here's the part where you say, "yeah, duh."

But most people are unaware of just how harmful their "social drinking" or "comfort food" really is. Well, they're either unaware, or they have some vague understanding of why it's bad but say "YOLO" and do it anyways. If you're in the second category, I can't really help you much.

Studies show that simply educating people about their food choices leads to weight loss. As the cliché goes "you can lead a horse to water." So allow me to lead you for a minute. The decision to drink is up to you.

I'm not going to make many friends with this next statement: your comfort foods, drinking habits & lack of time for exercise are all excuses. That's right. If it was your true priority, you'd make the necessary sacrifices, at least during the periods where you're aggressively pursuing your goals (remember the competitive cycle?).

Drinking regularly inhibits your ability to burn fat. Turning to comfort foods sets you up to resort to those foods any time you feel stressed & increases your preference for them. You enjoy the foods you always eat, and the most effective way to reduce a craving is to starve it. If you truly have your progress (and therefore wellbeing) as your top priority, you'd realize that drinking and cheat foods serve no purpose.

As far as time goes, everyone is playing with the same 24 hours. If you account for sleep and an average work shift, you have 8 hours of time to squeeze in a workout. I understand that many of you have a family & prior engagements to fit in as well, but substantial progress can be achieved with as little as 45 minutes per day of strength training. All it takes is a little foresight and increasing your efficiency during the time you spend in the gym & in the kitchen.

A few simple modifications can be made to accommodate this, and I'd love to help you make those modifications. I'm not the type to plug my own services, but this type of trouble-shooting is right up my alley. If you'd want to consult with me about how to go about making any of these changes presented in this article & beyond, then simply contact me or sign up for a consultation. Everyone has a goal, and like I described earlier, having someone in your corner to guide you there makes it that much easier to achieve.

It should be painfully obvious by now that progress is your entire goal. Stop making excuses & start lining up your decisions to encourage progress. By taking heed of these tips, you can choose the right goal for you and cycle your pursuit of it accordingly.