

## How to Reach Your Goals with a Science-Backed Tool | Dr. Emily Balcetis & Dr. Andrew Huberman

Uh what's the link between vision and motivation and how can we leverage that in order to better reach our goals So you know we started thinking about what are the goals that are most important to people that they struggle with the most So we asked hundreds thousands of people what their New Year's resolutions are We look to all the other polls that that do the same kind of work and regardless of where you look or who you ask or when you ask it people's number one goal is something related to their health right To to lose weight to exercise more to to get out get more steps for mental well being physical well being and and that's like the number one goal every January 1st So if if we were able to accomplish that goal you think it would drop a little bit in the rankings But it doesn't because it's really hard So we thought I wonder if there's a way for us to make some progress on that on helping people to exercise better more often stick to it longer and and make some progress there We know diets don't work and why why don't diets work for the same reason that that self talk doesn't work is that you know we go in it full bore hardcore Uh and it requires a major commitment and effort to a lifestyle change So again we were looking for something that might be easier than that that could produce big big payoff Right That's that's the golden ticket Something that requires less effort for a bigger payoff So one of the first things that I did was um go over to Brooklyn to this old armory building you know used to used to be a military armory space I know that building It's a beautiful building now that houses a lot of businesses right with plants on the walls there businesses there's a couple armory all around um the the the boroughs here around New York City and one and the one in Brooklyn in particular is now Y MC A right So it's a family Y MC A that's within a beautiful old red brick building that used to be a military establishment long long ago And what's really cool is that you know one winter after afternoon um you know somebody had invited me a physical therapist said hey you should come out and check out what's happening here with your interest in exercise and trying to find new ways of helping people new tactics that they can add to their tool belt Uh I think you're going to find some interesting people that are working out there So I showed up I look around you know there's families there's new moms there's kids that are you know moms trying to get kids to burn off some winter you know energy that they have There's

people that look like they're just there for their you know every couple of days going out for a run There's some people that look like they're training with the team and that's who this physical therapist introduced introduced me to is the was the coach of this team There's a bunch of people that were sitting down on the ground and I would be hard pressed to know who's the high school student that's in this group and then who as it turns out are some of the fastest runners in the world Like you know one of the people that was in the the last Olympics before I showed up on the gold medal for the 400 m and and from the looks of them I mean of course their bodies are in better shape than mine but there's nothing so pretentious Of course they're not wearing their medals There's nothing pretentious about how they're walking around or anything like that that would lead me to know like this person is amazing and they probably have some insight that I don't have So once I got introduced to them and knew who are these people that were part of this um pretty elite um training team that happened to work out at this family gym Uh I had the chance to talk with them about what strategies do you use Now I am not an elite runner and uh having recently had a baby I'm not really a runner right now at all But I thought when these people are running I bet they are like hyper aware of everything that's going on in their surroundings Where are they relative to the competition What's happening in their peripheral vision What's going on on the side who's behind them who's in front of them they probably have this like master sense this master visual plan at any point in time And that's what probably makes them elite So when I started asking them is that the case do you do you really pay attention to what's in your surroundings What's behind you What's on the side They said no like all of them said no And sometimes when I do do that it's a mistake it doesn't work for me So that was surprising It totally went against my intuition about what they do that likely contributes to their success What they said instead was that they are hyper focused They assume this narrow focus of attention almost like a spotlight is shining on a target Now when they're running a short distance that target might literally be the finish line the line that they're trying to cross It's a longer distance they set sub goals like you know the person the shorts on the person up ahead that they're trying to beat or they choose some sort of stable landmark like a sign that that they would pass by and like a spotlight is shining just on that or like they have blinders on the sides of their face That's all they're paying attention to It's really narrowed scope of attention And that was a strategy that they that all of these elite athletes said that they used and those that were better rather than um

you know that then slower were ones that used it more And I thought oh that's something we can play with right Like they are elite and they are accomplished But that visual strategy isn't necessarily something that you have to be in the perfect physical condition to be able to adopt And so I wonder can that help the rest of us who aren't competing for an Olympic Gold and who have no chance of ever getting one But who want to exercise better have a better have a better time doing it and maintain a commitment to that exercise goal that they might have that they might otherwise you know by February or March be giving up on if they had said it at the beginning of January So that's really where the work started was you know what you might call like focus groups or case studies of these incredible athletes And um and then we did other studies looking at you know you know people who aren't Olympic athletes but who are competitive and New York road runners runners and how are they running in races And what we found is that those people have better pace faster pace better time Um They use that narrowed strategy more often than this more expansive or you know open scope of attention And there seemed to be a correlation between that better performance among a wider swath of hundreds of of runners who are doing it competitively but still you know could be like the person that you're sitting next to in the office or yourself right And the more often that they did it the and the more um consistently they had adopted that that technique of the narrow focus of attention that seemed that they were doing better in their runs So then we started thinking like ok what about people who who aren't competitive runners What about like my mom can can can she do that or me when I'm trying to get back on the bandwagon and exercise more Is this a tactic we can teach people The answer is yes you can tell people about what these Olympic athletes are doing You can tell them about what the New York road runners runners are doing and just using the same language that I just use with you right Imagine that there's a spotlight shining just on a target choose choose something up ahead the stop sign two blocks up that you can you can just see and you know imagine that you have blinders on so that you're not really paying attention to the people that are passing by or the buildings or the garbage cans or the or the trucks that are on the road you know tune those out and focus in on that target until you hit it and then choose another one right Sort of recalibrate choose the next goal And so we would test like can people do that I mean if you're listening right now you probably are imagining that experience too And the answer is yes like I can imagine that I know what those words mean and I can do that And our work

found that too If people can do that we have them say out loud what is it that's captured your attention And of course sometimes something in the periphery like movement captures our gaze and and we are pulled there for for an instant but then we can refocus up again and adopt that narrowed attention Now one of the first studies that we did was was teach that strategy and juxtapose or compare it against a group that we said just look around naturally You know you might see that finish line up ahead and there's things on the periphery whatever your eyes want to do whatever you think is going to work best feel free to do that and tell us what you're looking at then we gave them a finish line We created sort of you know an exercise that's moderately challenging Um but possible we put ankle weights on that that accounted for about 15% of their body weight told them to lift their knees up sort of high stepping to a finish line So this would be challenging uh for them to do Um but we said you know it's an indicator of overall health and fitness Some of these people had narrowed their focus of attention and some were just looking more expansively or naturally And what we found is that those people that we trained just everyday normal people doing this this moderately challenging exercise they were able to move 27% faster They could do the exercise more quickly and they said it hurt 17% less The exercise was exactly the same for all the people we set we set the weight and we set the distance it was in you know our lab space So it was a constrained environment Everybody was in the same sort of circumstance but yet their experience was really different We helped them to move faster burn calories at a higher rate right Exercise more efficiently The amount of time they put in is going to produce a better uh physical outcome And it also it didn't hurt them Right They're saying it doesn't hurt as much So we were really excited about that right Because it meant that this strategy we could use it on people who are not elite athletes It could be easily adopted a quick training session right Can teach people to look at the world in a different way Again this narrowed attention was different than whatever they do naturally the comparison group Um but it had a big outcome It had a big difference on the way that they were engaged in the exercise It was like some of the first work that we did And then since then we've done you know dozens more studies to look at Well what happens with that And and and what else can we do with playing around with this Yeah those are impressive differences uh as a consequence of narrowing visual attention a couple of questions about the actual practice of narrowing attention Is there any indication of whether or not subjects um are constantly updating their visual attention So for instance

if uh let's say the goal line is uh in view literally from the beginning I could imagine just holding visual attention on the on the goal line But um if it's uh oval track or it's a trajectory along a trail or through a city how often do you think they are updating their um their visual aperture and setting a visual goal And I could imagine that there's some energetic expense to that So that um meaning how you know you wouldn't want to do every crack on the sidewalk unless those cracks on the sidewalk were very far apart because I think at some point that itself would be exhausting Um so is there uh an optimal strategy or a semi optimal strategy Yeah So you know those Olympic athletes that we that we started by interviewing they tended to be sprinters They were more often sprinters short distance sprinters So when they said like yes I narrow in more than I assume an expansive focus That's because they're not going that far right They have to do it as fast as humanly possible but they're not going that far And so we started asking that question too about like well wouldn't that be tiring And the answer is yes So when we start to look at what people who aren't sprinters who are accomplished but who are more long distance runners that's what we find that they do is that they um you know they're using that narrowed attention strategy strategically and it increases in use They use it more often as the race progresses and they really start to do this you know major switch um at about the halfway point of say like a 10 kilometer run So people who are seasoned runners they really start making a switch with what they're looking at about halfway through Um And that's where they more often more frequently and are more intentionally adopting a narrowed focus of attention when they're in the last couple miles of a run when maybe the resources are starting to get more thin maybe their motivation is starting to fade That tipping point in the middle is with any kind of goal where people struggle the most Uh And that's when they're like doubling down on a strategy that they know to be effective So you know at first longer distance runners are are not using that narrowed strategy They're they're looking more expansively Um because I think that that well first of all distraction is a thing it's useful not necessarily that they're distracting themselves because people are still trying to hold pace and jostle among probably a more concentrated group of runners Um But it is a strategy that they use and then sort of wean off of um as the race goes through and it's particularly effective we're looking for that last push right the last push to get over the finish line when you might be literally neck and neck with somebody that you you're trying to just be out or when you're most tired But you know like that last push you don't you don't want to drop

off Um And you know you want to push through hard through that finish line  
That's when people are using it at its peak level of intensity