

What to Do & Not Do When Setting Goals | Dr. Emily Balcetis & Dr. Andrew Huberman

The simple question is can I use this finish line strategy to make the start line a goal and get my system more engaged or motivated And is there any physiology or physiological changes I should say to reflect the idea that maybe just visually focusing on the start line would actually get me more excited as opposed to make me less excited to engage in effort There's certainly vision science that's tied up in that very first stage of of goal setting like identifying what that goal is in the first place and taking those first steps a lot of people's go to strategies that involve vision are are vision boards or dream boards or you know post it notes right They're creating some sort of visual representation of what it is that they want to accomplish Where is it that I want to be in five years 10 days 10 years whatever whatever that timeline is that they're working under the idea of vision boards or dream boards is that you like you know almost like a scrapbook collect visual icons that reflect where you want to be to motivate yourself It's a really common tactic that people use and it's not bad to do that right For some people just even knowing what they want in life is a major accomplishment Defining the goal can be really challenging for people And that's a strategy that works and involves our visual experience right It's not just people aren't saying like why don't you just sit around and and imagine what you want your life to be like in 10 years the strategy that people are suggesting is like no cut out the pictures put it on a board and stick it by your bathroom mirror So you see it every day make a list on these lists I have a lot of friends Have you made your list The list of things that you insist on having in the context of fitness relationship job etcetera etcetera This seems more and more common Yeah totally And the idea like write it down right They're telling you write it down like or or create a visual manifestation of it Um And so yeah that that's effective for identifying what you want but it may not actually be effective for helping you to meet the goal to get the job done So colleagues of mine at New York University um have probed why why is that Why is just you know thinking about what you want in your life and um and sort of putting yourself vicariously into those shoes imagining what my life would be like if I can accomplish everything on this list Why doesn't that work Well first of all does it work The answer is no And why does it not work Uh Because what happens These colleagues Gabrielle Oten Jen and her and her research

team have found is that you know going through and dreaming about or or or visualizing how great my life will be when I get Xy and Z done Um That is that is like a goal satisfied I have identified what it is that I want I have experienced it even if just in an imaginary way I've had that positive experience of of thinking about how great my life is going to be when I get this thing done and they start to sort of rest on their laurels She's actually measured systolic blood pressure and heart rate and they found that people who do that who go through that experience of visualizing how great my life will be when I get Xy and Z done Their their systolic blood pressure the bottom number on your blood pressure reading decreases OK Now I'm all about finding ways to relax especially in New York right You're constantly living at a high level of stimulation and so like cool great So maybe I should just like think about how awesome my life will be when I get my bucket my bucket list done But motivation scientists know that systolic blood pressure is actually an indicator of our body's readiness to get up and act to do something Now that can be the going out for a walk going out for a run hitting the gym it can also be things like doing math problems right Even if it's it's something that's just mental systolic blood pressure actually goes up in anticipation of your body or your mind needing to do something taking the first steps on a goal So then it is it helps us to understand of like OK if I've just created this dream board this vision board and put myself psychologically in that space of a goal satisfied why is it bad that blood pressure goes down Because it means your body is chilling out It's like all right cool I just accomplished something pretty major I actually now don't have the physiological resources at the ready to take the first step right now to do something about that So so that was a pretty monumental um uh finding for motivation scientists to understand that like creating these dream boards these vision boards or to do this might actually backfire because it in and of itself is the creation of a goal and the satisfaction of the goal And then people understandably give themselves some time to just enjoy that positive experience so much for the secret Yeah exactly Exactly I guess now the secret folks will come after me but I try to never say the name I'm not afraid to say the name I mean I I imagine that certain strategies might work for other people But I everything you're saying again is consistent What we know about the physiology of dopamine circuits for motivation I have a good friend who perhaps in incidentally perhaps not is a cardiologist Uh at a major university said that uh one of the major errors that people make uh with book writing and completion is they will tell people they're gonna write a book

and people will say oh you definitely should write a book Everyone's gonna love your book and they never end up writing it And his theory is that they get so much dopamine reward from that immediate feedback with all the protection of never having the book criticized that they never write the book I'm sure there are exceptions to this But um I guess it raises the question what's the better strategy Yeah So I'm not saying that people who enjoy a dream board creation should stop what they're doing That's not the take home message here board Oh definitely not that no there's enough anxiety and fear in the world We don't need to encourage more of it Um But the process of goal setting shouldn't stop with articulating what the goal is Um So at that same point that we're trying to figure out what do we want to do What what is my vision for the future in those planning sessions We need to simultaneously uh think about a couple of other things One is um how we're going to get there So take it out of the abstract take it out of this idyllic visual iconography and start thinking about the practical day to day We need to break it down into more manageable goals not just my 10 year plan for myself but my two week plan what what can I accomplish in the next two weeks and the two weeks after that's going to set me on the right trajectory That's probably not surprising to anybody who's been thinking about how do I set goals better you know plan plan big picture think big picture abstractly but then also break it down more concretely That's probably not surprising but it's an important aspect of the goal setting process Then again Gabrielle Oten in my department has identified a third often overlooked or underappreciated stage that has to happen at that goal in the goal setting process And that's thinking about the obstacles that stand in your way of success and that it will actually help improve motivation in the long run And sometimes you think that that like is counter intuitive You're saying like for if I want to increase my motivation have more motivation that I need to think about how hard it's going to be all the ways that I'm going to fail How is that going to like jazz me up How is that going to help me get through when I actually you know when when when things get hard But it does because it's like coming up with a plan B A plan C plan D in advance of actually experiencing that If you were on a boat and the boat started to sink that's not the time you want to start looking for life jackets You already want to know where one is so you can go to it right away And it's the same thing with goal setting is that you want to know what am I working towards how I'm going to get there And if I experience this obstacle here's what I'm going to do about it You may never experience that obstacle But if you do you're

probably going to be shy on time thin on resources maybe experiencing an anxiety that hijacks your brain So you're not functioning at that optimal level of judgment and decision making You want to already have like the snap next step in place so you can just hop to it right We're not going to do our best thinking when we're in crisis mode Um But we don't have to if we have used if we have already used our resources in advance to come up with that plan B or that plan C