

Implementation Intentions

I first heard the term ‘implementation intentions’ when I read James Clear’s book ‘Atomic Habits’. The concept of ‘implementation intentions’ was in fact introduced in 1999 by psychologist Peter Gollwitzer.

The singular term ‘goal’ hides an important range of dimensions and actions we undertake when we think about and endeavour to reach our goals. German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin was one of the earliest to make the distinction between what he called ‘goal setting’ and ‘goal striving’ (Lewin, 1926). His point being that we have a period where we deliberate, ponder and possibly select our goals, and a period where we actually strive towards realising those goals.

You don’t just set a goal and the magic of reaching that goal suddenly happens. Things need to be figured out. We embark on a journey with obstacles and challenges at different points in order to reach our objective. In short, goals exist as a multistage pursuit.

According to the Model of Action Stages, psychologists have identified four action phases involved when we strive towards a goal, namely: deliberation, planning, action and evaluation.

At its simplest, a goal is the ‘object or aim of an action’. It’s the thing we want to achieve through an action, or in most cases, a series of actions.

You could say that a goal is an internal representation of a desired state. We imagine and visualise what we want and, in turn, take goal-directed actions that are in concordance with our plans for accomplishing it - Implementation Intentions.

Let’s say that you want to make a habit of exercising consistently. Researchers have discovered that while many people are motivated to workout (i.e. they have the desire to workout and get fit), the people who actually stick to their goals do one thing very differently from everyone else.

In 2001, *British Journal of Health Psychology* reported how researchers began working with 248 people to build better exercise habits over the course of two weeks. The subjects were divided into three groups:

- The first group was the control group. They were simply asked to track how often they exercised.
- The second group was the “motivation” group. They were asked not only to track their workouts but also to read some material on the benefits of exercise. The researchers also explained to the group how exercise could reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and improve heart health.
- The third group received the same presentation as the second group, which ensured that they had equal levels of motivation. However, they were also asked to formulate a plan for when and where they would exercise over the following week. Specifically,

each member of the third group completed the following sentence: “During the next week, I will partake in at least 20 minutes of vigorous exercise on [DAY] at [TIME] in [PLACE].”

The results - Motivation vs. Intention

- In the first and second groups, 35 to 38 percent of people exercised at least once per week. (Interestingly, the motivational presentation given to the second group seemed to have no meaningful impact on their behaviour.)
- 91 percent of the third group exercised at least once per week - more than double the normal rate.

Simply by writing down a plan that said exactly *when* and *where* they intended to exercise, the participants in Group 3 were much more likely to actually follow through.

The sentence that the third group filled out is what researchers refer to as an ‘implementation intention’, which is a plan you make beforehand about when and where to act. That is, how you intend to implement a particular habit or achieve a goal.

Hundreds of studies have shown that implementation intentions are effective for sticking to our goals, whether it’s writing down the exact time and date you will take an action or detailing the sequence of process you will follow.

People who make a specific plan for when and where they will perform a new habit are more likely to follow through. Too many people try to achieve their goals without these basic details figured out. We tell ourselves “I’m going to eat healthier” or “I’m going to write more,” but we never say when and where these actions are going to happen. We leave it up to chance and hope that we will “just remember to do it” or feel motivated at the right time.

An implementation intention sweeps away foggy notions like “I want to work out more” or “I want to be more productive” and transforms them into a concrete plan of action.

Many people think they lack motivation when what they really lack is clarity. It is not always obvious when and where to take action. Some people spend their entire lives waiting for the time to be right to make an improvement.

Once an implementation intention has been set, you don’t have to wait for inspiration to strike. Do I write a chapter today or not? Do I meditate this morning or at lunch? When the moment of action occurs, there is no need to make a decision. Simply follow your predetermined plan.

The simple way to apply this strategy to your goals is to fill out this sentence:

I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION].

- I will meditate for one minute at 7 am in my kitchen.
- I will study Spanish for twenty minutes at 6 pm in my bedroom.
- I will exercise for one hour at 5 pm in my local gym.