

BEHAVIOR CHANGE & GOAL MANAGEMENT

GOAL MANAGEMENT

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Excellent Goal Management Accelerates Thriving!

Social science shows us that youth thrive when they develop strong goal management skills that support positive trajectories. These goal management skills comprise an internal navigation system of sound reasoning—one that selects optimum goals and strategies to achieve life aspirations. Research has teased out components of goal management that conveniently line up with the acronym GPS, just like a car’s navigational system. GPS stands for:

- G** Goal Selection —“Where do I want to go?”
- P** Pursuit of Strategies —“What is the best way to get there?”
- S** Shifting Gears —“How do I compensate when the road gets rough?”

Youth develop these goal management skills when they have a caring adult who helps them explicitly learn and practice each distinctive component. As youth pursue goals and shift gears in face of obstacles, there are two elements to nurture:

Persistent resourcefulness (an indicator of thriving), which is the ability to persevere in goal attainment, with creativity and fortitude.

Goal Adjustment, which is the ability to shift to a new relevant goal when the mounting facts suggest the goal is perhaps unrealistic to attain. (i.e. A youth desires to be a professional quarterback but after sustaining several

concussions, shifts to a goal of sports announcer to realize his dream of participating in professional football.)

By 5th grade, goal management skills can be measured in youth. Measurements of GPS ability, applied to positive youth development goals, predict the extent of the thriving trajectory in adolescence and adulthood. High GPS skills correlate with reduced risky behavior as well. When youth grow GPS skills, they are developing logic and harnessing emotions, modulating the thinking-feeling tension that is represented in any response to temptation.

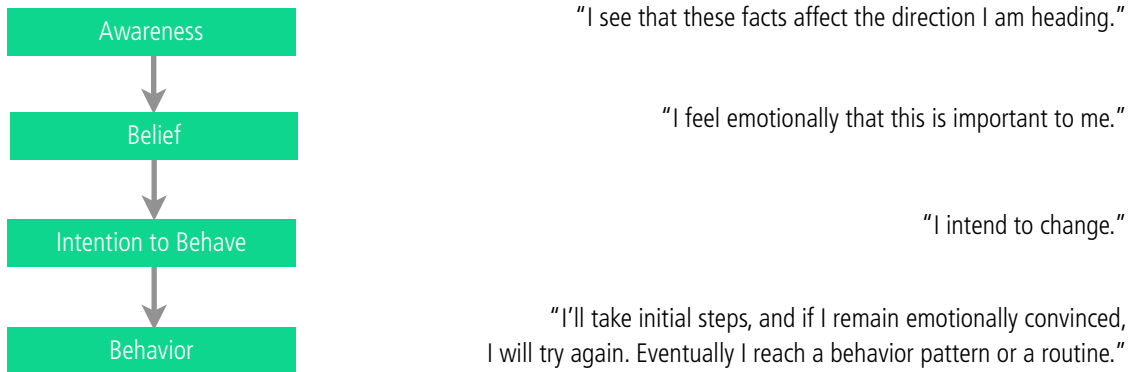


Four Stages of Behavior Change

Usually some shift in personal behavior is required to achieve a challenging goal. Too often as a society, we operate on the premise that awareness about relevant facts will change behavior. In truth, this approach only works when desired behavior is relatively easy and compliments already chosen paths. When change is hard, awareness is just the first stage to shifting to a new pattern.

Mentors help youth adopt new behavior when they understand and promote a four-stage progression that moves from awareness to the desired pattern of action.

The four-stage progression is:



The behavior change process is not static. Rather, behavior might revert back and forth from old, habitual ways to new ways, during the change progression. Maintaining behavior change after initial adoption requires intentional effort and stronger support.

Adults must craftily consider the universal "emotional elephant" to move youth along this progression.

Motivate the Emotional Elephant

Jonathan Haidt, an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, talks about this emotional elephant, in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*. The emotional elephant is the 5-ton animal in our heads that motivates us to take action. On the elephant's back is a small rider, that represents our reasoning self. When adult guides think about motivating youth to achieve goals, they should consider and engage the youth's emotions in the change process. Goal achievement is facilitated when the emotional elephant and the intellectual rider are riding in harmony. Dr. Chip Heath, a professor at Stanford University, identified steps to motivate the emotional elephant in pursuit of challenging goals:

- *Visualize the Destination Postcard*: Clarify the dream and goal ahead; then elicit the youth's emotions to visualize what it will look and feel like when that vision is achieved.
- *Shrink the Change*: The elephant resists doing things without immediate payoff. To motivate the elephant, help youth break down the goal into bite-size pieces, or "shrink the change". When you see these mini-wins, point them out to the youth to build confidence and reinforce good choices.
- *Seek Help with a Growth Mindset*: Encourage youth to embrace challenge and balance personal growth of skills with ways to seek help from others.
- *Develop Action Triggers*: Encourage youth to develop immediate goal steps that include precise timing, location and resources needed. Their chance of achieving the goal will increase by 70%.

- *Find Bright Spots:* Identify behaviors that are already working, called “bright spots”, and help youth think about how to do more of them. These signs of early success give youth hope that they are capable of reaching their goals.

Bright Spots Suggest Action Plans

To support youth through change in pursuit of their goals, help them clone the bright spots, and simultaneously work to make the journey easier by “creating a downhill slope, and giving them a push”.

Bright spots provide the impetus for action plans. Dr. Heath paints a picture of Bobby who gets in trouble at school. His adult mentor, Murphy, asks Bobby to tell him a time at school when he is better at staying out of trouble. Bobby mentions Ms. Smith’s class. As Murphy probes, Bobby identifies things about Ms. Smith and her class that seem to help him behave well. For instance, Ms. Smith always greets him as he walks into class, checks with him to make sure he understands assignments, and sometimes adjusts his work to be responsive to his learning disability.

Murphy eased the journey for Bobby by approaching Bobby’s teachers with recommendations that matched Bobby’s ideas. He asked the teachers to help him track whether the solutions worked by recording Bobby’s performance on three metrics: 1) arriving on time to class 2) completing assignments 3) behaving okay in class. Over the next three months, Bobby’s rate of showing up at the principal’s office dropped by 80%. Before the intervention, Bobby earned acceptable in only one out of two class periods per day. By the end of the intervention, Bobby earned acceptable in four or five of six classes a day. Murphy shaped Bobby’s environment so that it was easier for Bobby’s emotional elephant to move down the path to improved classroom behavior. Murphy anchored to a plan built upon bright spots.¹

References

1. Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*. Basic Books (2006).
2. Dr. Chip Heath, Thrive Chair, Stanford University, and brother Dan Heath.
3. Dr. Richard Lerner, Bergstrom Chair in Applied Developmental Science; Director, Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development.

Footnotes

1. Murphy, John J. (1994) “Working with What Works: A Solution-Focused Approach to School Behavior Problems”. *School Counselor*, 42, 59-66.