

Need help with your goals? Eating better may simply mean following the signs

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We all pursue goals. It stands to reason that we meet our goals better when we pursue them consciously. But is that really the case? Perhaps not, according to a forthcoming study in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. As the study shows, unconscious goal pursuit can be just as beneficial.

"Suppose someone wants to eat more healthy foods. Many people believe, or are told, that the best way to do that is to establish it as a goal and constantly think about it," write the authors of the study, Juliano Laran (University of Miami), Chris Janiszewski (University of Florida), and Anthony Salerno (University of Cincinnati). "We find instead that such things as subliminal messages—say, a sign in a grocery store that promotes healthy eating—can be just as effective."

The authors established those results by conducting six studies that revolved around just that: making [healthy food choices](#). One study, for instance, explicitly asked over 200 [participants](#) to "make a healthy choice" and then asked them to choose a granola bar, sun chips, or [potato chips](#). Those same participants were involved in a second stage of the study that, they were told, tried to understand people's preferences for snacks. They were again asked to choose between granola bars, sun chips, and potato chips. Some of the participants were in addition told to "try to be health-conscious and exert self-control"; others were not, and it was those others who were considered to be the unconscious goal pursuers: would the mandate of the earlier study—to choose healthy foods—still on some level resonate with them? That is, would they unconsciously pursue [healthy eating habits](#)?

The authors found that participants who consciously pursued healthy eating were more likely to choose the best option (the granola bar) than participants who were unconsciously pursuing the goal. At the same time, participants who unconsciously pursued the goal were likely to choose an option that was consistent with the goal—granola bars or sun chips. In both cases, a goal-consistent choice was made.

"Life can be too busy to pursue our goals consciously. But simply encountering goal-related information during the day will unconsciously activate goals and help us make choices that are consistent with those [goals](#)," Laran, Janiszewski, and Salerno write.

More information: Juliano Laran et al. Exploring the Differences between Conscious and Unconscious Goal Pursuit, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2015). [DOI: 10.1509/jmr.13.0263](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.13.0263)

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