

How do consumers revise their unreachable goals?

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Most consumers spend their lives setting -- and revising -- goals. Authors of a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* have unveiled a new model that captures the dynamics of goal revision.

"People set goals to regulate their weight, their spending, their eating, their alcohol and cigarette consumption, and many other things," write authors Chen Wang (University of British Columbia) and Anirban Mukhopadhyay (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology). But just as soon as people set goals, they start readjusting them.

The authors explain this process by introducing Wally, who would like to lose some weight. Wally starts out by first establishing a goal to lose 20 pounds in the next month. But what if, a few days in, Wally realizes that losing 20 pounds is too difficult? Or what if his goal had been to lose five pounds and he loses it within two weeks? Both of these situations involve adjusting goals.

"As they strive toward their goals after setting them, people often recalibrate the original goal," the authors write. Such adjustments can be downward (when a goal is too far out of reach) or upward (when more challenge is desired.)

The authors investigate and explain the dynamics of goal revision. They created a model that incorporates four principles of goal revision. Monotonicity and diminishing sensitivity state that the amount of goal revision (in either direction) is proportional to the [discrepancy](#) between

the achievement and the [target](#) in the previous time period. [Aspiration](#) maximization and performance satisficing state that the [motivation](#) of the goal (whether it comes from within or is external) determines whether people aim higher each time they set a goal and how responsive they are to failure and success.

"We believe this is a complete model of goal-directed behavior that encapsulates pursuit, achievement, failure, and abandonment," the authors write. "It can be used to help people set goals more effectively, and guide them toward reaching their goals. It can help infer why people set the goals they do, and can advise what goals are unreachable and should be disengaged from."

More information: Chen Wang and Anirban Mukhopadhyay. "The Dynamics of Goal Revision: A Cybernetic Multi-Period Test-Operate-Test-Adjust-Loop (TOTAL) Model of Self-Regulation." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2012 (published online June 13, 2011). ejcr.org

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