

Achieving Your Goals: Does removing yourself from the big picture help?

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Consider the case of the adult student attending night school to earn a degree that will result in a better job with higher pay. From sacrificing time with friends and family to missing a relaxing evening watching TV, this type of long-term gain often comes with short-term pain. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, people are more likely to achieve their goals and avoid temptations when they are able to remove themselves from the big picture.

"Past research on personal achievement has focused on whether someone sets nearsighted or farsighted goals. We were interested in how staying focused on the self can either help or hinder a person's ability to overcome indulgences and distractions when they are either focused on the 'big picture' or remain more in the near term," write authors Ravi Mehta (University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign), Rui (Juliet) Zhu (Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business), and Joan Meyers-Levy (University of Minnesota).

In one study, participants were offered M&Ms while answering questions focused on either staying connected with friends and family or improving their health. Some participants answered the questions while seated in a cubicle facing a mirror. Results showed that when participants were focused on themselves (mirror), they were more likely to eat the M&Ms when their goal was more abstract (improving their health). Conversely, in the absence of self-focus (no mirror), the participants were more likely to eat the M&Ms when thinking about friends and family.

Brands selling luxury products or "trendy" goods can use this research to understand how and when a person might stray from personal saving and spending goals. These results also have important implications for public policy makers working on campaigns that promote responsible behavior like healthy eating and practicing safe sex.

"If a person does not focus on themselves or give any thought to their typical behaviors, they are able to use a big picture way of thinking that brings to mind universal ideals that society teaches us about the importance of behaving wisely and acting responsibly," the authors conclude.

More information: Ravi Mehta, Rui (Juliet) Zhu, and Joan Meyers-Levy. "When Does a Higher Construal Level Increase or Decrease Indulgence? Resolving the Myopia versus Hyperopia Puzzle." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2014.

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