

When pursuing goals, people give more weight to progress than setbacks, study says

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New Year's resolution-makers should beware of skewed perceptions. People tend to believe good behaviors are more beneficial in reaching goals than bad behaviors are in obstructing goals, according to a University of Colorado Boulder-led study.

A dieter, for instance, might think refraining from eating ice cream helps his weight-management [goal](#) more than eating [ice cream](#) hurts it, overestimating movement toward versus away from his target.

"Basically what our research shows is that people tend to accentuate the positive and downplay the negative when considering how they're doing in terms of goal pursuit," said Margaret C. Campbell, lead author of the paper—published online in the *Journal of Consumer Research*—and professor of marketing at CU-Boulder's Leeds School of Business.

On the up side, the finding, called the "progress bias," can be a motivator for some—whether they're trying to lose weight, eat healthier foods, save money or win a game. A lapse while working toward a goal, referred to as goal-inconsistent behavior, doesn't feel as damaging to the perpetrator and can be redeemed. Successes while working toward a goal, referred to as goal-consistent behavior, feel like big accomplishments.

On the down side, the bias could lead people to engage in too many goal-inconsistent and not enough goal-consistent behaviors because the goal pursuers feel they are making progress when they actually aren't, said the

researchers.

"So our moral for the season is monitor, monitor, monitor," said Campbell. "For example, dieters need to pay close attention to calories in and out—both aspects—during this tempting time to keep from falling prey to the bias."

The researchers found that even when the goal-consistent and goal-inconsistent behaviors are the same size, like saving \$90 or spending \$90, the bias tends to be present.

The researchers also found that the bias can apply on behalf of others, when one thinks about another who is pursuing a goal and the other's [behavior](#) toward or away from the set objectives.

A lack of confidence in a goal, because of past failure or possible difficulty achieving an over-zealous goal, can lessen the [bias](#), found the researchers.

Caleb Warren, co-author of the study, graduated with a [doctoral degree](#) from CU-Boulder with his doctoral degree and is an assistant professor of marketing at the Mays Business School at Texas A&M University. He says the findings are important in marketing because consumers are goal-driven.

"Consumers buy products and services in pursuit of goals to get an education, make friends, woo lovers, care for their families, win money, lose weight, save for retirement, impress others and so on," said Warren. "Many goals require consumers to control themselves to repeatedly engage in behaviors that move them closer to, and avoid behaviors that move them further, from their goals."

The paper includes research from seven studies involving hundreds of

participants who took part in activities such as choosing between and eating a donut or a carrot and then answering questions, or reading and imagining a scenario about saving or spending money and then answering questions.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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