

Q&A: Student examines how the pandemic affected how we pursued our goals

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COVID-19 upended lives worldwide, impacting hopes and dreams as well as disrupting goals.

Hayley Svensson, a fourth-year graduate student in the [social psychology](#)

[doctoral program](#) at the Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, wanted to examine how the pandemic impacted people's pursuit of personal and professional goals.

Svensson, whose paper on the matter was published in the journal *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, examined how experiencing the difficulty of making adjustments amid disruption brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic relates to how we think, feel about and achieve our goals.

Svensson and her collaborators conducted two studies involving participants who were primarily [undergraduate students](#). In both studies, participants completed an [online survey](#) where they answered questions about their goals during the pandemic and [personal characteristics](#).

"We found that people who had more difficulty adjusting their goal pursuit during the pandemic experienced more [negative feelings](#) toward their goals, were less satisfied with the status of their goals, and were less likely to actually achieve their goals," noted Svensson, a member of the Regulation, Action and Motivated Perception Lab in the Department of Psychology.

Svensson, who studies goal pursuit, [self-regulation](#) and motivation, discussed her research.

Of course, goals were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Why study it?

Studying disruptions during goal pursuit can give us important insight into possible strategies we can use to overcome those obstacles and achieve our goals.

We found that being better able to adjust one's goals was associated with more goal achievement and satisfaction with the goal. We also found that some people may be better at adjusting their goals than others, like those who don't have a strong preference for situations that are predictable or expected.

Only through research that finds evidence of these disruptions in the first place can we begin to explore the processes at play and possible solutions.

What are some key takeaways from your research?

The more flexible we are when pursuing our goals, the better.

Pursuing goals that are important to us is fulfilling but can also be difficult. During these difficult times where we may experience delays or setbacks, we should be willing to adjust our original plans and consider alternative courses of action that may actually increase the likelihood we will eventually achieve our goal.

Was there anything from your findings that surprised you?

Overall, our results lined up well with our predictions. However, the idea of adjusting how we pursue our goals is under researched, so any results we got would have been telling.

Do you have any advice for goal-seeking college students facing disruptions?

I definitely encourage you to take advantage of all the opportunities you have in college to explore various career paths and interests. It can be

easy to focus all our attention on a specific path. We often forget that there are other options out there for us.

Check in with yourself from time to time to make sure the [goals](#) you are pursuing still make you happy. If they no longer do, don't be afraid to reevaluate and adjust.

What are you working on now?

Related to the idea of goal adjustment is goal disengagement, which is essentially choosing to no longer pursue a goal.

Goal disengagement is very underexplored in research, and I am currently working on projects seeking to answer some basic questions about it. Studying how we respond to obstacles allows me to get a more nuanced view of the goal-pursuit process beyond merely whether someone achieves their goal or not.

I am really passionate about people getting the most out of their goal-pursuit experiences, and that will continue to be the backbone of my work.

More information: Hayley Svensson et al, Goal disruption during COVID-19: Reimagining goals during a global pandemic, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/spc3.12863](https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12863)

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