

Making backup plans can be a self-fulfilling prophecy

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Is having a Plan B always a good idea? Or can these 'safety nets' actually make you less likely to achieve your goals? Psychologists from the University of Zurich propose a new theoretical framework for studying the effects of backup plans. According to their model, the more effort people put into making backup plans, the more distracting and harmful those backup plans can become.

Many goals, from finding your dream job to finding a date to the movies, can feel completely out of your control. A common piece of advice to manage this uncertainty is: "Always have a backup plan." But is it actually wise to invest time and energy into backup plans, or is it better to focus all of your energies on trying one way to achieve a goal? To address these questions, psychologists from the University of Zurich developed a new theoretical model to study the use and usefulness of backup plans, which will be published in the January issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

"Our model is based on a straightforward idea: backup plans change the way you pursue your goal, even if you aren't using them, and even if you never use them" said Dr. Christopher Napolitano, first author of the paper. "Sometimes, having a backup plan may boost your confidence," Freund, co-author and chair of the Developmental Psychology: Adulthood group at the University of Zurich added, "but other times, having a backup plan might distract you, or limit how hard you work using Plan A."

How much you invest in developing a backup plan could determine its effect. "Of course, it's a good idea to spend some time and effort developing your backup plans, so you go into complex and important situations with a safety net in place," said Chris Napolitano. However, according to Napolitano and Freund's model, investing much in making backup plans could create a sort of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' where one is especially likely to use especially well-developed backup plans, and thereby undermine sufficient investment into succeeding with a Plan A.

More information: C. M. Napolitano, A.M. Freund, A. M. (in press). On the use and usefulness of backup plans. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

Provided by University of Zurich

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