

Want to achieve your dreams? Try subdividing your goals

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Have a massive, daring goal in mind? Breaking it into smaller steps can help you achieve your dreams.

A [research paper](#) led by Wharton Ph.D. alumni Aneesh Rai and Edward Chang and co-authored by Wharton professors Marissa Sharif, Katy Milkman, and Angela Duckworth finds that breaking down a commitment to volunteer 200 hours per year for a nonprofit into smaller subgoals (volunteering 4 hours weekly or 8 hours biweekly) increased the amount of time volunteers spent helping by 7%â€"8% over several months.

When applied across a large organization like Crisis Text Line (CTL), which partnered with Wharton faculty and doctoral program alumni on the study, the 8% increase in volunteering becomes quite meaningful.

If CTL implemented the researchers' most effective approach across all volunteers for a year, it could result in an estimated 19,900 additional hours of volunteeringâ€"at virtually no extra cost, the paper reports.

These findings, [published](#) in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, suggest that subgoal framing can be a cost-effective and potent strategy for individuals, managers, and organizations hoping to make long-term progress on their [goals](#).

To produce these results, the researchers communicated with more than 9,000 participants who had signed up to volunteer on the CTL crisis counseling platform and had committed to spending 200 hours per year as counselors. Some people were encouraged to aim for "some hours every week" to hit their 200-hour yearly goal and others were encouraged to volunteer "8 hours every 2 weeks" or "4 hours every

week" to hit their 200-hour yearly goalâ€"messages that broke that larger goal down into more bite-sized, short-term targets.

The researchers found that how they framed the goals influenced how many hours crisis counselors actually spent volunteering.

Milkman said, "Our major contribution is to demonstrate in a large, organizational setting that simply encouraging people to pursue bite-sized, short-term subgoals when they are committed to big, long-term goals substantially boosts their achievement over the long-term at absolutely zero cost."

How to accomplish goals without procrastinating

Breaking down a big goal into smaller ones means there are more immediate objectives to meet (or miss). This means there are more frequent and immediate deadlines, which previous studies along with Milkman's research show can reduce procrastination.

"We believe that setting more detailed subgoals can help people stick to their goals because these smaller steps require less time commitment compared to tackling the whole goal at once," Milkman said. This aspect makes commitment to the goal more appealing, similar to the "pennies-a-day" effect. For example, in a 2020 study, participants were more willing to sign up for a savings program when it was framed as deducting smaller amounts more frequently from their bank account compared to a larger sum deducted less often.

While setting more detailed subgoals has its advantages, it also comes with some risks that are explored in the paper. One danger is that it can make people feel too comfortable. Subgoals act as clear milestones of progress, which can make people feel that they have already accomplished a lot early on and can relax their efforts. "This means

people might slack off or lose motivation," Milkman said.

Flexibility is key to achieving your dreams

Another significant risk in suggesting people strive to achieve micro-goals on short time scales is that it offers them less flexibility in how they'll achieve their long-term objectives. For instance, if your goal is to visit the gym 120 times a year, there are many ways you could accomplish that. But if you break it down into a monthly goal of 10 gym visits, your options for achieving that goal become more limited.

"The smaller the goals, the less wiggle room you have to change your plans. This lack of flexibility can lead to a higher chance of failing or facing setbacks, which might make you give up on the goal altogether," said Milkman.

Research on what's called the "what-the-hell effect" has shown that when people don't meet their goals, it increases the likelihood of them giving up on their goals entirely. For instance, a study from 1975 found that dieters who exceeded their daily calorie limits often ended up abandoning their diet entirely by overindulging.

And yet, more recent research has highlighted the advantages of being flexible in pursuing goals. For example, a study from 2021 by Wharton's Marissa Sharif showed that incorporating psychological flexibility into goals, by [allowing for "emergency reserves"](#) like skipping days in a gym routine, helped improve goal performance by far more than just setting less ambitious goals overall.

Flexibility reduces the feeling of failure when there's a setback; additionally, being flexible in pursuing goals gives people more control over their schedules, which studies show has various benefits like improved well-being and work-life balance.

In exploring their own data, Rai and his co-authors found some "suggestive evidence" that shows describing subgoals more flexiblyâ€"for example, encouraging volunteers to work "8 hours every 2 weeks" rather than "4 hours every week"â€"slows the decline of volunteering rates (which generally decay over time). These findings imply that flexibility in goals might be more important for maintaining commitment over the long-term than for initially motivating goal pursuit, Milkman noted.

"Essentially, what we're saying is that subgoals can enhance progress," said Milkman. "However, as these subgoals become increasingly small, they also become less adaptable. This means that micro goals are beneficial up to a certain point, but pushing too far into the detailsâ€"say, with hourly goalsâ€"would likely actually start to impede progress."

More information: Aneesh Rai et al, A field experiment on subgoal framing to boost volunteering: The trade-off between goal granularity and flexibility, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001040](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001040)

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