BACK TO SCHOOL

USE THE BRAIN FOR GOAL SETTING

By Rita Hitching, M.Sc., BSc. Psychology

The end of summer is upon us. You've probably been shopping for new school supplies, and even a new lunchbox. But have you thought about the new school year? I don't mean what you'll wear on the first day back or what adventures you'll tell your friends about your summer, but what you want to get out of the next school year? Let me explain to you the powerful brain effects of setting goals, and the important role it plays in achieving your best.

Your teenage brain is glorious - if you didn't know that already. Neuroscience has shown that the brain goes through critical periods of growth and development - while in the womb, the first year of life, and the early years; right into adulthood. What scientists have more recently discovered is that the brain undergoes a 'secret mission' of change during the period between the ages of 12 to 19 years that is truly unique.

Goal Setting

Goal setting creates a pathway to change. Your brain can focus on your present self as well as your future self. When you set a goal, you are imagining a new you - a you with difference skills, views, opinions, and knowledge. The saying "...if you can see it, you can be it..." really is true. The incongruence or tension between your current self and the one you want to become, creates tension that propels you into action. Goal setting needs to be considered and well thought out - the brain is in a state of flux as a consequence of your new goal, affecting how you think, feel, and behave.

Goal Steps

To achieve any goal, there are steps along the way. You can't learn the guitar in one day, or become better at writing, or any other goal you set without a plan. When you set a goal, devise a plan to achieve it - planning is crucial. The brain is intrinsically wired to reward you with a release of dopamine with every step you take towards your goal. As you probably already know, dopamine makes you feel good. Remember the brain wants your present self and your future self to be the same. Breaking down a goal into mini-goals increases your odds of succeeding and makes you feel good along the way, as the brain is regularly 'rewarding' you by the actions you take to move closer to your future self. Remember to set a positive goal rather than a negative goal - instead of, "Not be late for school" consider, "Get to school on time."

Example: Get to school on time - Steps to Success

1. Set out clothes and school bag night before
2. Prepare lunch box with non-perishable items after dinner
3. Go to bed at a reasonable time - to get a minimum of 8-10 hours sleep (remember you grow and make memories when you sleep)
4. Set an alarm clock - ideally not using your cell phone - avoid the snooze button
5. Have a shower and get dressed
6. Eat breakfast and finish lunch box
7. Leave for school
8. Repeat

The success of any goal is consistency - make your plan and work your plan - achieving your goals will follow.

Goal Setbacks

Making a goal and not working towards it makes your brain very unhappy - remember it wants you to achieve your goal, as it has already imagined and set to memory your future self. By not meeting your mini-goals towards your bigger goal, the brain will shut off dopamine release - causing you to feel bad. The brain is trying to help you out - it believes that if you'll feel bad you'll do something about it! In other words - work towards your mini-goal.

Reward Yourself

Once you've set your goal and told others, voicing a goal has a profound effect of 'making the goal real' and leads to encouragement and accountability by others. Be mindful of believing the hype - if you start to believe that you've already achieved your goal, because everyone tells you that you can do it, your brain may think that you've already achieved your goal. If your brain believes you've already achieved your goal, it reduces the level of tension between your present self and your future self - leading you to be less motivated to act in ways that will help you meet your mini goals towards your major goal. Make sure your mini-goals are measurable - in the "Get to school on time" example - keep a diary of how many days each week you were able to be on time; reassess at the end of each week. Consider what barriers or helpful events happened to achieving your goal.

Brain Protection

Your brain wants you to succeed - it does not want to be in a state of tension. Carefully consider your goal, if your goal is too difficult and you are unlikely to achieve it, the brain will set you up with a mindset of 'Let's try our best' scenario. The brain does not want you to feel bad about yourself because you cannot achieve your goal. The 'try' mindset rather than 'will' mindset leads to inaction.

Here's another example - don't set a goal to run a marathon in a month - the brain will think that's impossible and you'll not go for a single run. Instead, consider running a 5K in a month, finding a running buddy, setting a regular calendar time to run two to three times a week, sign up for a race, and start training. Then repeat for a 10K, 1/2 marathon and then a full marathon. That's what I did and it worked! I completed my first marathon in March of 2019.

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