

[THE SCIENCE OF SUCCESS]

The If-Then Solution

No willpower? No problem. **By Heidi Grant Halvorson, Ph.D.**

I HATE EXERCISING. Every January of my adult life I've vowed to make it a part of my routine, and every year I've come up with wonderful excuses for avoiding the self-torture. Except last year: I've been exercising three times a week since 2010 began, and I've never felt better.

What finally worked for me? A simple plan. You've heard that one before, I'm sure. But I'm not talking about just any plan here. I mean "if-then planning," a technique that is uniquely useful when it comes to resisting temptation and building good habits.

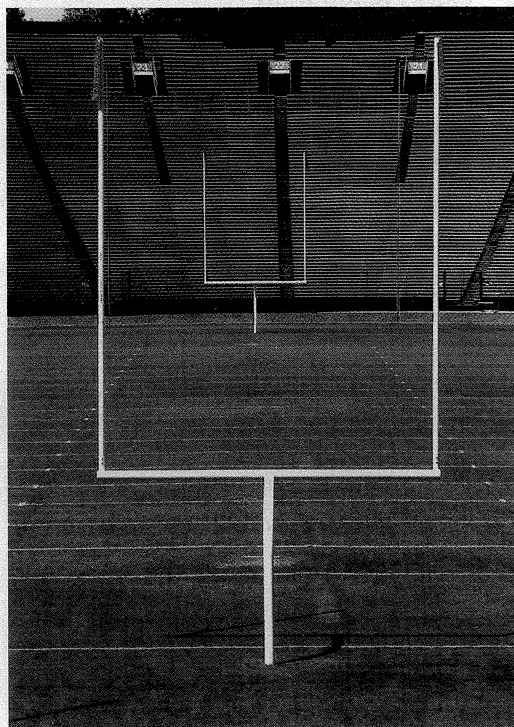
Imagine your New Year's resolution is to lose weight. Most people would make a plan like this: "Eat less, exercise more."

For starters, it's not nearly specific enough. *How much* less will you eat, and *of what*? *How* will you exercise, and *how often*? The *if-then* version of this plan spells out exactly what you will do in the critical situation.

If X happens, then I will do Y.

X can be a time and place, like Monday at 9 A.M., or it can be an event, like the arrival of the dessert menu at a restaurant. Y is the specific action you will take whenever X occurs.

So Step 1, "Eat less," becomes something like "When the dessert menu comes, I will ignore it and order coffee." Step 2, "Work out more," turns into "I will work



out for an hour at the gym on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays before work."

Amazingly, you are two to three times more likely to succeed if you use an if-then plan than if you don't. In one study, 91 percent of people who used an if-then plan stuck to an exercise program, versus 39 percent of non-planners. Peter Gollwitzer, the NYU psychologist who first articulated the power of if-then planning, recently reviewed results from 94 studies that used the technique and found significantly higher success rates for just about every goal you can think of, from using public transportation more frequently to avoiding stereotypical and prejudicial thoughts.

These plans work so well because they speak the language of your brain: the language of contingencies. Humans are very good at encoding information in "If

X, then Y" terms, and using this process (often unconsciously) to guide our behavior. Deciding exactly when and where you will act on your goal creates a link in your brain between the situation or cue (the *if*) and the behavior that should follow (the *then*).

Let's say your wife has been giving you a hard time about forgetting to call to say whether or not you'll be home late. So you make an if-then plan: If it is 5 P.M. and I'm at work, then I will phone my wife. Now the situation "5 P.M. at work" is wired in your brain directly to the action "call home."

The second thing that happens is that the situation or cue "5 P.M. at work" becomes highly activated. Below your awareness, your brain starts scanning the environment, searching for the situation in the "if" part of your plan. Lastly, once the "if" part of your plan happens, the "then" part follows *automatically*. You don't *have* to consciously monitor your goal, which means your plans get carried out even when you are preoccupied.

The best part is that by detecting situations and directing behavior without conscious effort, if-then plans are far less taxing and require less willpower than mere resolutions. They enable us to conserve our self-control strength for when it's really needed, and compensate for it when we don't have enough. Armed with if-thens, you can tell your fickle friend willpower that this year, you really won't be needing him.

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