

# Goal Conflict as a Barrier to Regular Physical Activity

Dan Bailis, Ph.D.  
 Department of Psychology  
 University of Manitoba

1

## What we know/don't know

**Know:**

- Psychology of exercise motivation
  - From beliefs/values to desire/intention
- Goal features that promote success
  - Ex. – specific & challenging; personally endorsed vs. externally imposed

**Don't know:**

- Psychology of exercise self-regulation
  - From desire/intention to action/maintenance
- How goals compete for action tendencies
  - Ex. – exercise vs. academics
- Solutions for goal conflict
  - A new target for intervention?

2

## Objectives/Hypotheses

1. Goal conflict leads to poorer mood and state self-esteem
2. Goal conflict leads to decreased exercise
3. Reducing or preventing goal conflict leads to increased exercise

3

## Inducing goal conflict

- Series of ~11 experiments
  - Pre-screening of potential participants
  - Randomized, controlled designs with 1-week follow-up to assess exercise behaviour and/or attitude change
  - Typical 2-step procedure involves ...
    - ... eliciting a commitment to exercise and then
    - ... "priming" either conflicting (academic) or consistent (exercise) goals

4

## Objectives 1 & 2

- Goal conflict raises shame/distress

5

## Objectives 1 & 2 (cont.)

- Goal conflict raises negative affect, lowers positive affect & ability perceptions

Measure (range)	University Importance				F (1, 107)	$\eta^2$
	High Academic (n = 30)	High Exercise (n = 34)	Low Academic (n = 23)	Low Exercise (n = 24)		
<b>Affect/State Self-Esteem</b>						
Negative (1-5)	1.5 (0.6)	1.3 (0.4)	1.4 (0.4)	1.3 (0.3)	2.62*	.02
Positive (1-5)	2.9 (0.8)	3.1 (0.6)	3.2 (0.8)	3.2 (0.8)	4.05**	.04
Ability (1-5)	3.7 (0.7)	3.9 (0.5)	4.0 (0.6)	4.1 (0.7)	3.76*	.03

6

## Objectives 1 & 2 (cont.)

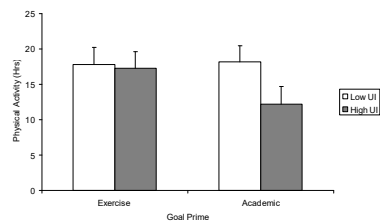
- Negative feelings aroused by goal conflict can be conditioned to exercise-related objects/settings

Measure (units/range)	University Importance				F (1, 107)	$\eta^2$
	High Academic (n = 30)	Exercise (n = 34)	Low Academic (n = 23)	Exercise (n = 24)		
<b>Water Bottle</b>						
Uses (#)	1.0 (1.4)	1.8 (1.8)	2.0 (1.8)	1.7 (1.9)	4.33**	.04
Liking (1-10)	7.7 (1.9)	8.1 (1.8)	8.6 (1.2)	8.7 (1.5)	4.36**	.04

7

## Objectives 1 & 2 (cont.)

- Goal conflict reduces exercise frequency



8

## Follow-up questions

- Does exercising for the love or fun of it protect individuals from experiencing goal conflict?
  - 3 studies – and the answer is ...
  - No. Exercising despite goal conflict prevents the experience of love or fun
- Does self-consciousness aroused by goal conflict affect the settings in which people will prefer to exercise?
  - Public vs. private

9

## Objective 3

- Interventions tried so far ...
  - Implementation intentions
    - Setting aside times to exercise
    - Prevents goal conflict
  - Message framing
    - Focus on the benefits of performing exercise or the costs of non-performance
    - People with high goal conflict respond relatively favorably to messages emphasizing costs
  - Exercise-benefits-learning video

10

## Summary/Conclusions

- Objectives reached
  - > 7000 survey participants
  - > 1000 participants in experimental studies
  - 12 honours & masters students supported
  - Dissemination started via refereed papers and conference presentations
  - Durable products: goal conflict scale, intervention videos

11

## Implications for policy and practice

- Low motivation is frequently miscast as the cause of physical inactivity
  - Where physical inactivity is due to goal conflict, traditional motivational interventions may lead to frustration, not action

12

### Implications (cont.)

- Goal conflict can be induced and “framed away” quite easily
  - Psychological solutions
    - Priming of exercise goals
    - Planning for exercise
    - Focusing on benefits of exercise for alternate goals
    - Focusing on costs of inactivity as well as benefits of regular activity

13

### Implications (cont.)

- Some needed changes are cultural and structural, not psychological
  - Automation / active transportation
  - Time / circumstance

14