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WyngateCare 
Your life Your choice

SESSION 5

Goals

GOALS

Goals are a crucial part of our society; you follow a course of study in higher education with the aim of later working in a chosen profession, you boil water in order to drink coffee, you travel with the goal to arrive at a destination, etc. There are many different types of goals. Some goals are abstract and far away (“I want to be successful”), others are concrete and relatively close (“I want to be done writing this article before 5 o’clock tomorrow”). One aspect that all goals have in common is that they all deal with the future.

Goals can be very useful. First, they determine a direction, a path to arrange our actions and time in such a way that we can achieve the goal. We can then see whether our actions are in line with our goal. A large number of studies have also shown that when one has sufficient skills, goals can be very motivating (Goal-setting theory; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002). Moreover, goals can give direction to life and when they are reached, they can contribute to the belief in our own abilities (self-efficacy). Finally, goals can also provide structure and clarity.



PITFALLS OF GOALS

Although goals can be useful and motivating, an excessive focus on goals can have negative consequences. When too much attention is paid to goals an imbalance between goals (future) and the road to the goal (now) occurs. We notice that our minds are constantly busy with goals: how do we reach them? What will happen if we don’t achieve them? What do we need to do? We then spend more time on the future than on the moment. In this way goals can dominate our lives. In the following sections we discuss common pitfalls of focusing too much on goals.

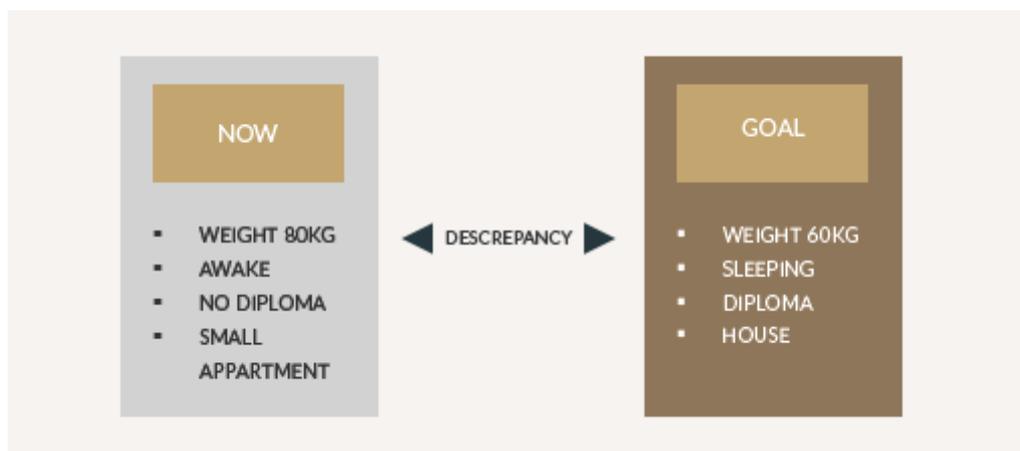
INEFFECTIVENESS

We set goals to achieve something which we do not yet have or at least not sufficiently. For example, if we set the goal to lose weight, we try to get a lower body weight than we currently have. The moment we set a goal a discrepancy or gap between how things are now (“I weigh 80kg”) and how it is when we reach our goal (“I weigh 60kg”) arises. Thus, achieving a goal basically means to close the gap between the present and the desired future. While focusing on goals can be very effective, too much focus on goals can also lead us to not achieving the goal.

Have you ever tried really hard to fall asleep? Often the harder you try to achieve this goal, the longer you stay awake (Harvey, 2003). In a similar vein, it seems that people who aim to have fewer negative thoughts about themselves report lower self-confidence (Borton, Markowitz, & Dieterich, 2005) and that people who want to reach the goal of losing weight may actually gain weight (Herman & Mack, 1975). In short, if we focus too much on achieving our goals this may lead to the paradoxical result that we just don’t reach them.

But how does this happen? One reason is that too much focus on our goals not only makes us aware of the goals, but also on the fact that we have not yet reached them. We are highly aware of the gap between the here and now (“I’m awake”) and the desired goal state (“I want to sleep”). When we notice that we are not making enough progress in closing the gap (you notice that you are still awake), this can lead to frustration (goal frustration; Boekaerts, 1999)(see fig. 1). This frustration works against us in achieving the goal.

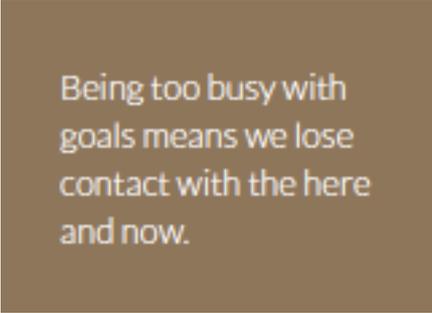
Fig.1 Too much attention to one goal can increase the discrepancy between now and the goal



Another reason is that being so engaged in goals means that less attention is available for actions in that moment. Imagine, your goal is to write a good article. While you are writing, you are constantly occupied with the goal to finish the article (how important it is to finish the article, what this will mean, etc.). The attention you pay to this goal while writing is not available for the writing itself.

LESS ATTENTION TO THE HERE AND NOW

Goals are about the future. The future is simply a mental construct; we can only imagine the future in our minds. In fact, the future is not real. Only here and now are real. Thinking about the future is also happening now. Even if the future will eventually occur, it can only happen in a moment that will also be the now. In short, the reality is only here and now. If we pay too much attention to goals, this can cause us to think a lot. We then live in our minds and are constantly busy with these goals and the future. We lose focus on the



Being too busy with goals means we lose contact with the here and now.

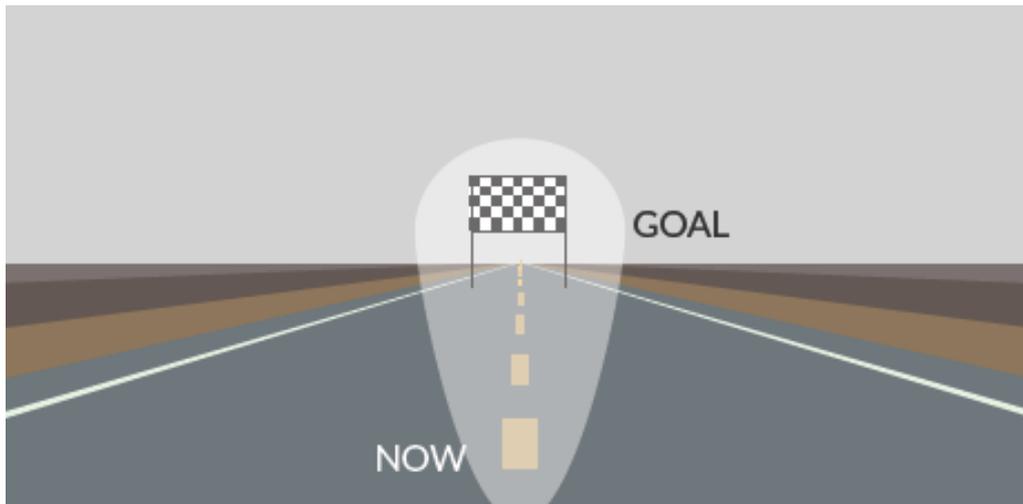
moment, and even if we pay attention to the moment, we see that moment through the glasses of our intended goals. A moment is seen as a way to get to the next moment. The moment itself is then never as important as the goal that we are trying to achieve. We focus on the goal so that we experience the way to that goal only

partially. It seems as if the present moment is never good enough. It is nothing more but a tool to move forward toward the goals we want to achieve. The more we strive to achieve a goal, the more our attention is distracted from the here and now.

Being too busy with goals you want to achieve narrows the focus of your attention. You are focused on the future and you are less able to see the value of the moment (see fig. 2). In this moment, many worthwhile things could happen that might not directly have something to do with your goal, but may be enriching yourself. The phrase “time is money” is an extreme example. In this example, the phrase says that time should not be wasted on things that do not directly lead to the goal “make money”.

If what is happening right now is not directly relevant to your specific goal, it is easy to judge that moment as pointless. The conversation with your colleague about his weekend is not really relevant for achieving your goal to write a report today. You hardly see that this conversation probably leads to a better relationship with your colleague and a better working atmosphere.

Fig.2 Too much attention to goals limits the attention for the present moment



ANXIETY AND WORRYING

Goals are about the future. Because we can only imagine the future with our thoughts, too much attention to goals can result in thinking too much. In some cases these are relatively neutral thoughts like “what must still be done?” or “when I have achieved it...” But these thoughts can also be negative. For example, if we realize that we might not achieve that goal in time or perhaps might not achieve it at all. In such cases anxiety can easily occur. Anxiety, that we will not achieve our goal, that we will fail, that it won’t turn out well, what the negative consequences will be, etc. This often results in worrying about the future.

THE ILLUSSION THAT ACHIEVING GOALS INCREASES HAPPINESS

One of the most important questions one can ask when it comes to goals is: why do we set goals? The answer to this question is in most, if not all cases: because we believe that achieving the goal will ultimately make us happy or at least happier. But research has shown that in many cases this happiness is of short duration. A study done by Brickman and colleagues (1978) for example shows that people who recently won the lottery were not happier than a control group. Although achieving something can cause temporary happiness, this is rarely of long duration. The moment we achieved a goal we are already busy with the next goal. We often do not stand still on our way to a goal and often spend too little attention to the already achieved goal. This is partly because we quickly adapt to new situations. In the literature this is called “hedonic adaption” (Brickman and Campbell, 1971; Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999).

When the new house is finally there, we are soon used to more space and a dishwasher. They are taken for granted. They were once a goal, but now they belong to our standard reality. By now we are already busy with new goals; a beautiful garden, a rebuilding of the attic, etc. The moment we finish our study, we are already working on the next goal; finding a good job. The ambition seems to never end. The momentary gratification that results from achieving a goal seems to be a source of motivation to want more or to want to be somewhere else.

MINDFULNESS AND GOALS

Mindfulness can help create more balance between goals on the one hand and the way to the goal on the other hand.

CONSCIOUS GOAL SETTING

Mindfulness does not mean you no longer set goals, or that you just live in the moment. It does mean that you set goals consciously. Research has shown that the achievement of static goals (unique circumstances) such as getting a house, a car, a million Euros, does not make a lasting contribution to your happiness (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Often such goals are set to strengthen a certain identity (more about this in week 7).

Dynamic goals however, are not unique circumstances but rather a process that requires constant attention, intention and commitment. Examples are playing the piano, sports, leading a project, etc. Here, doing in and of itself is also a goal. Such goals lead rather to longer lasting happiness. This is especially true when these goals increase your relatedness to other people. Mindfulness teaches us to reflect on intention to be aware of why we strive for a goal. Do you want to be a writer because you will be a famous and important person (static goal: circumstance), or because you like writing and because you can inspire people and yourself with writing (dynamic goal)?

EFFECTIVENESS

Planning and goal setting are often required to effectively reach our goals. By consciously setting a goal, you can then choose to come back to the here and now. You use your mind to just jump into the future and then return back to the moment. By reminding yourself of a goal and then returning to the moment, it is more likely that you will achieve that goal. The attention can now be fully focused on the act in that moment instead of on the thoughts about the purpose or the gap between now and the goal (e.g. the act of writing the article rather than the looming deadline). When your attention is fully focused on writing in

this moment (sentence after sentence), it is likely that the writing will be even faster and more effective (hypo-egoic self-regulation; Leary, Adams, & Tate, 2006).



LESS ANXIETY

By living less in your mind and by focusing on the here and now, the fear of not achieving goals is reduced. If you notice that there is anxiety, let the anxiety be. Accept that it is there and therefore ensure that you do not lose extra energy to the need to control the anxiety or the achievement of an anxiety-free state.

Anxiety is always an illusion. It is a thought that something might happen. Anxiety is never a thought about something that is happening now. Because if something you are afraid of is happening right now, you usually know how to deal with it. From your anxious thoughts however you can ultimately never win. This is because these thoughts are about something that is not yet certain and therefore can always be countered with “yes, but what if”. Even though you comforted yourself with ten arguments that the presentation you have to give tomorrow is going to work, your anxiety is always able to come up with something that might not succeed. For instance, anxious thoughts might still convince you that the audience will be bored by your presentation or that there will be questions you can’t answer. Your anxiety can adopt any possible future, however likely it is to occur.

Anxiety controls your thoughts and therefore your actions. Mindfulness teaches you to recognize that the anxiety is there, without wanting to get rid of it. You can repeatedly choose to go back to the moment and to step out of the train of anxious thoughts. By seeing that the anxiety is there and accepting it, you become an observer of your anxiety (observing self).

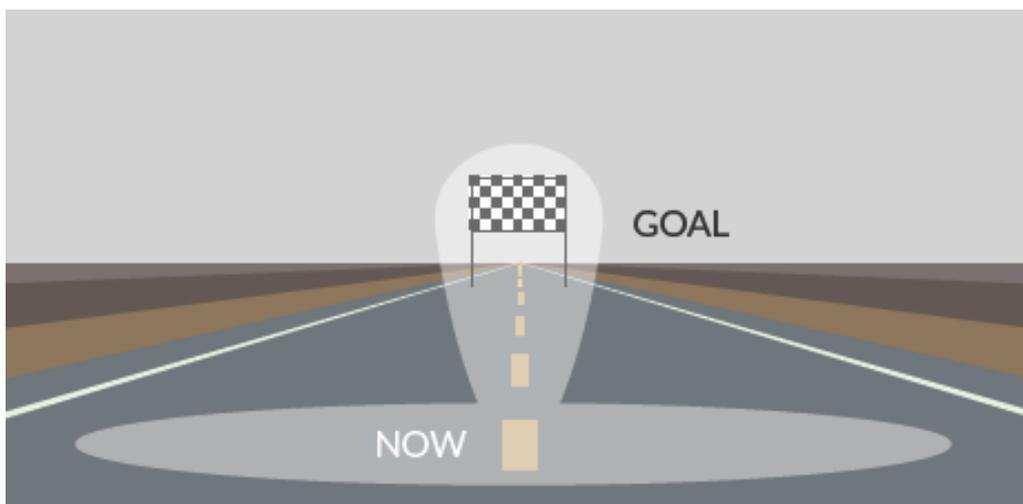
You accept the feeling of anxiety that you experience right now (it is there anyway) and you remain there with your attention. Instead of spending energy to control the anxiety or the achievement of an anxiety-free state, let the anxiety simply be. It's okay that you are experiencing anxiety. See what happens when you remain there. If you experience anxious thoughts, you can tell yourself that it's just a thought; it's not the truth.

GRATITUDE

Instead of always looking ahead at what is still to come, mindfulness teaches us to reflect on what is. In this space for the moment, one can learn to apply so-called intentional activities (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006) such as being grateful for what is or to focus on the positive. This allows a change in the relationship to things and circumstances. The focus is not primarily directed on what still needs to be done and what we are still missing, but on what there is here and now.

If more attention is paid to the path to the goal, it is also easier to see what this moment has to offer. The moment contributes much more than just a building block for your specific goal. By being less busy with the result but being more in the moment, it is easier to be aware of the sub goals/self-development that you have achieved on the way to your ultimate goal (see fig.3).

Fig.3 Mindful attention for the present moment broadens the focus and restores the balance between the goal and the way to the goal.



PRACTICE: GRATITUDE

Goals put the emphasis on what is still to come. When we are very busy with goals we can be very aware of what we do not have yet or the person we have not yet become. It is then easy to be dissatisfied. Dissatisfaction is the opposite of happiness, which is often defined as life satisfaction.

Instead of being busy with everything that is not here yet, attention to the positive aspects of the here and now can help us experience more satisfaction and happiness. Gratitude is to reflect on what is, in a positive manner, as things are in the here and now.

A simple, but very powerful exercise, before going to sleep, is to reflect on the positive events of the day. What has been positive today? It does not have to be a big event. Examples may include a short walk, a good conversation and a nice meal. This can create more gratitude and a more positive perspective on life (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

INFORMATION: GRATITUDE

Research has shown that gratitude is a pleasant state that is related to positive emotions such as satisfaction (Walker & Pitts, 1998), happiness, pride and hope (Overwalle, Mervielde, & De Schuyter, 1995).

Research by McCullough and colleagues (2002) also showed that people who are generally more grateful scored higher on positive mood, vitality, optimism and lower on jealousy, depression and anxiety.

By being grateful for what is, a specific focus is applied to the positive aspects of life. By training this type of attention, the filter/glasses through which we look at things changes. One will be more susceptible to seeing positive aspects in life, one sees rather what makes life worth living. This increases our capacity to see the available positive information.

The exercise “Gratitude”, as described in the previous section, was extensively studied in a series of studies by Emmons and McCullough (2003). They found that participants who focused daily on the things they are thankful for, experienced more positive feelings and reported a decrease in negative feelings. In addition, they found that doing the exercise on daily basis led to improved quality of sleep, more physical activity and less physical complaints.

AT HOME

- Do the exercise “Three-minute Breathing Space” about three times a day (see session 4).
- Do the exercise “Gratitude” on daily basis.
- See if you can become aware of the goals you strived for this week. Are you more often busy thinking about your goal rather than what you are doing to achieve the goal (the path to the goal)? Ask yourself, is it advantageous to focus on my goals, or is it better for me to focus on what I’m doing right now?
- Try to do the breathing meditation as often as possible this week.
- When you are doing the seated meditation, pay attention to how pre-occupied with goals. Does the meditation have a purpose for you? Notice how many thoughts you have about goals (things you still need/want to do). Note if you have those thoughts and gently return your attention to the here and now. Can you make the meditation itself, the exercise itself the main goal?

LOGBOOK

MONDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing space		
Gratitude		

TUESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing space		
Gratitude		

WEDNESDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing space		
Gratitude		

THURSDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing space		
Gratitude		

FRIDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing space		
Gratitude		

SATURDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing space		
Gratitude		

SUNDAY

Exercise	Times performed	Observations or perceptions during the exercise
Seated Meditation		
Three-minute Breathing space		
Gratitude		

NOTES
