

Regulating Your Emotions

A strategy to help you regulate your emotions

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What can we learn from research on [self-regulation](#) that might help us with our [emotion regulation](#)? Implementation intentions can be used strategically to influence what emotions we might experience. This interests me because regulating emotions successfully can foster more effective self-regulation and less [procrastination](#).

In a study published earlier this year in the *Journal of [Personality](#) and Social Psychology* (full citation and link to paper below), Inge Schweiger Gallo (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Andreas Keil (University of Florida), Kathleen McCulloch (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Brigitte Rockstroh (University of Konstanz) and Peter Gollwitzer (New York University and University of Konstanz) reported on an extension of the use of implementation intentions to regulate behaviors to the regulation of emotions. This study has important implications for [understanding](#) how we can better self-regulate to procrastinate less.

As regular readers of this blog may recall (see my previous post entitled "[A strategy for change](#)"), an implementation intention is different from a goal intention. Goal intentions specify the intended end state that we may wish to attain. An implementation intention spells out when, where and how we will attain this goal in a structured format: "In situation X, I will do behavior Y, to achieve sub-goal Z." This type of intention clearly links action to the situation. The situation is the cue for behavior. In short, implementation intentions are formed in the service of our goal intentions.

While it's true that simply having a goal intention is a necessary and a somewhat effective step towards attaining the goal, research indicates that forming an implementation intention enhances goal attainment overall. Implementation intentions are strategic in successful goal pursuit. In a very important sense, implementation intentions automate our self-regulation by placing the cues for behavior in the [environment](#). As summarized by Gollwitzer and his colleagues, they help us by: 1) cueing the initiation of goal-directed behaviors, 2) maintaining goal striving, 3) disengaging us from ineffective behaviors and switching to alternatives, and 4) conserving self-regulatory capacity (see [willpower is like a muscle](#)).

The benefits of implementation intentions have been demonstrated across a number of goal types including: performing regular breast examinations, cervical cancer screenings, resuming activity after joint replacement surgery, eating a low-fat [diet](#), engaging in regular physical activity and taking vitamin pills regularly. Implementation intentions also help us keep on track with longer goal pursuit, helping us to resist temptations or distractions, or to resist internal cues related to self-regulation failure such as being tired or anxious.

This last reference to implementation intentions and our emotional state is the focus of this paper. The authors assume that emotional reactivity carries features of automaticity similar to habitual behavioral responses, and **they propose that implementation intentions may serve the goal intention of reducing emotional reactivity**. Their particular focus is on the emotions of disgust and [fear](#). In a series of studies, they presented participants with disgust- and fear-eliciting pictures. Fear is of interest generally because it relates directly to anxiety disorders. It is of interest to me in my research with procrastination as it also relates to the association between fear of failure and procrastination.

The research design

As always in my blogs, I will summarize the general approach of the research and overall results (you can read the full paper online with the link provided below). The experimental design involved an experimental group who made implementation intentions of the nature "If presented with a fearful picture, I will stay calm," and the experimental group was contrasted with a goal-intention group who had the goal of down-

regulating their emotional response (e.g., "I will not get frightened"), as well as a control-group who had neither goal intentions nor implementation intentions in relation to emotion regulation. These groups were compared both in terms of self-reported emotions (Studies 1 and 2) and electrocortical correlates of emotional experience (Study 3). As I noted, the overall goal of their research was to explore whether adding implementation intentions to emotional-regulation [goals](#) would make these goals more readily achieved.

Their findings

In each study, the results indicated that participants in the implementation intention condition were able to down-regulate their emotional response more successfully. For example, in Study 1, when participants formed a response-focused implementation intention to reduce arousal when viewing a disgusting picture, they were more successful at reducing arousal. Mere goal intentions did not produce this effect. Likewise in Study 2, fear responses were significantly lower to a spider picture stimulus for the participants who formed implementation intentions. Finally, the electrocortical data from Study 3 indicated that the [brain](#) responds to the implementation intention with an "ignore response" when an "ignore" intention is made as the "when" condition in the implementation intention.

Implications of this Study

Overall, these data support the notion that emotional-regulation benefits from the formation of implementation intentions. These implementation intentions automate emotional regulation, moreover it seems to be more efficient, resulting in less self-regulatory or ego-depletion overall. What this means, the authors argue, is that this strategy doesn't seem to have unwanted [cognitive](#) consequences or related impairments such as impaired [memory](#). Consequently, implementation intentions of this type may be one solution to the short-term emotional problem in self-regulation of "[giving in to feel good](#)."

Interestingly, the authors argue that what might be happening psychologically with the formation of an implementation intention to down-regulate emotional responding is to switch from the "hot" emotional system to the more "cool" system of self-control.

Implementation intentions and procrastination

The implications for self-regulation are clear as I've argued before in relation to implementation intentions. The simple act of forming an implementation intention to keep calm and to keep going when we begin to feel overwhelmed with a task may be a crucial step in preventing procrastination. What we're doing is making a preparatory volitional act by forming an implementation intention. The key thing is to recognize that we'll face negative feelings with the task ahead and to make the emotion-regulation implementation intention at the same time we begin to think about the goal intention.

Let's take a simple example to illustrate this process. Facing a large writing assignment ahead, I make the goal intention of completing the task and the specific goal intention of beginning my work at noon the next day. Anticipating how much I dislike both the topic of the writing assignment and writing itself, I also form this implementation intention, "When I open my word processor tomorrow at noon, I will ignore the fear and other negative emotions that I will feel as I face this writing task, and I will just get started."

The results of this recent study by Inge Gallo and colleagues, as well as the large body of research already published by Petter Gollwitzer on implementation intentions indicates that I'm more likely to be successful in my writing task if I do this. My implementation intention to ignore my negative emotions will "outrun" my fear response, and I will successfully get started.

Reference ([Read this paper](#))

Gallo, I. S., Keil, A., McCulloch, K.C., Rockstroh, B., & Gollwitzer, P.M. (2009). Strategic automation of emotion regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *96*, 11-31.