



The Benefits of Writing: Health and Productivity

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Abstract

Current empirical research conducted in both laboratory and real-world settings has outlined the myriad of benefits to narration, goal-setting, and their combination. The narration of trauma has long been known to influence physiological health and psychological well-being. Recent investigations have shown that explicitly describing one's ideal-future yields similar results. Knowledge of goals has also been linked to optimal health both in response to trauma and with regards to the daily pursuit of happiness. Finally, a large body of inquiry conducted in the industrial/organizational realm supports the proposition that goal-setting results in improved performance across a large number of domains. The synthesis of these separate literatures appears logical and potentially very beneficial for both personal and professional applications.

Narrated Trauma and Health

A fascinating body of research, pioneered by James W. Pennebaker in 1986,¹ has linked specific acts of structured narration to enhanced mental and physical health. Studies of this effect typically employ written output, although variations such as verbal expression do exist. Participants are asked to narrate a traumatic personal event or, in the control condition, a trivial topic, during 15 to 30 minute sessions. These sessions range in frequency from a single instance to multiple sittings spread out over a matter of weeks. During each session, individuals are instructed to write continually for the allotted time, without regard for grammar or spelling. In conjunction with this manipulation, a number of health-related variables are assessed (beginning during the writing period and continuing for several weeks afterwards). Individuals assigned to write about a stressful occurrence in their own life typically manifest a number of salutary outcomes with regards to health, relative to those who narrated non-traumatic material. Such participants typically pursue fewer physician consultations², exhibit greater psychological health in the long-term³ and even experience better immune function.⁴ Other benefits include faster re-employment for recently dismissed professionals,⁵ and higher grade-point averages for students. Kitty Klein and Adriel Boals recently demonstrated, as well,

significant increases in working memory among participants in two well-controlled studies, attributable to a decrease in anxiety and depression-related intrusive thoughts.⁶ These results appear robust, and have been demonstrated in over two-dozen studies using a number of populations around the world.⁷

Recently, the health benefits of trauma narration have been replicated using a very different sort of content. Earlier this year, Laura King⁸ explored the potential ramifications of narrating life-goals and ideals, as opposed to past traumatic experiences. After reading a set of general instructions,¹ a group of participants engaged in a writing-task, using methods similar to those described previously. Individuals in the control condition were asked to write about their plans for the day. Three weeks later, those who wrote about their best possible selves scored significantly higher on measures of psychological well-being (which included such concepts as personal happiness and life satisfaction) than individuals who described trivial short-term plans. Health records were also obtained and analysed for all participants. Although the two groups did not differ in average health-care use prior to the experiment, in the five months following the writing manipulation, people who wrote about their ideal future visited a health centre for medical reasons significantly less often than those in the control condition. This study is of marked importance as it demonstrates that the mere act of narrating one's future goals can manifest tangible and observable health benefits. Previous research clearly supports a relation between goals and health, albeit in a less direct and dramatic fashion.

Narrated Future Goals and Health

The formation and pursuit of goals can be a valuable tool in coping with loss or trauma. From a common-sense perspective, the importance of "getting on with one's life" following a traumatic incident is necessary for optimal healing. Failure to do so opens a door to depression, motivated by the apparent hopelessness of all activity. Empirical research has found support for the psychological benefits of forming plans following a traumatic loss. Stein, Folkman, Trabasso and Richards⁹ found, for example, that explicated goals were predictive of adaptive coping for a population of caregivers who had lost their partners to AIDS. The formation of

¹ Think about your life in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of all of your life dreams. Now, write about what you have imagined.

future- and self-oriented plans was related to better positive well-being at the time of bereavement, and better recovery a year following¹⁰. Similar research findings have supported this relationship in organizational contexts, with regards to the concept of job stress. Elovainio and Kivimäki,¹¹ who examined a population of Finnish nurses, found that the degree to which goals were clearly stated and well-comprehended by staff moderated the amount of strain experienced individually. This applied not only to the goals associated with each job or work unit, but to the aims of the entire organization as well.

Outcome-oriented thinking and behaviour is clearly useful in times of emotional upset. It also appears to aid day-to-day well-being. Researchers interested in human emotion have found that strategies such as goal maintenance and the attainment of new goals are often employed in response to happiness, by adults and children.¹² In fact, goal strategies are used to cope with other emotions as well, including sadness, anger and fear.¹³ Kennon M. Sheldon and Linda Houser-Marko¹⁴ asked first-year students to describe eight future goals, and to rate their reasons for pursuing them. They found that intrinsic identification with the goal was of great importance, describing such identification as self-concordance.¹⁵ Attainment of internally-motivated goals was much more likely than attainment of those fuelled by external sources. These extrinsic motivations are often related to sources of negative-emotion such as parental pressure or guilt. Furthermore, the attainment advantage for intrinsic goals was also self-reinforcing: A high degree of success in the first-semester of school led to greater feelings of self-concordance; this in turn led to relatively more successful goal-attainment in the second semester. Individuals who experienced a higher level of goal-attainment in the second semester also manifested greater relative adjustment and a more satisfying sense of growth by the end of the research period.

One path to happiness clearly appears to lie in the identification and pursuit of personally relevant goals.¹⁶ The most stunning outcome of this extended study, however, was related to performance. Scores for the American College Test (ACT) (required at the University of Missouri for all incoming students) were compared with each student's final grade-point average (GPA). Individuals in the process of pursuing goals for self-concordant reasons had GPA's higher than those predicted

by their ACT scores. Remarkably, however, the majority of their goals were not at all course- or grade-related. In the words of the authors: "This finding suggests that those people who can identify sets of goals that well represent their implicit interests and values are indeed able to function more efficiently, flexibly, and integratively across *all areas* of their lives"¹⁷ (emphasis added).

Narrated Goals and Task Performance

Decades of empirical research has supported the proposition that setting goals and pursuing them can lead to significant improvements in task performance.

¹⁸ The majority of this work has been explored in an industrial/organizational context.

Locke and Latham laid the base for the initial theoretical work on the benefits of goal-setting.¹⁹ The model they constructed collaboratively has four major tenets:

- Goals that are specific and difficult lead to better performance than vague exhortations to "do your best" (and, of course, than no specified goals whatsoever).
- The relationship between goal difficulty and performance is linear and positive.
- Other factors such as competition, provision of feedback, and participation in decision-making do not affect performance beyond their function in establishing and adjusting the commitment to specific and difficult goals.
- Direction, effort and persistence are three primary motivational mediators of the goal-setting/performance relationship. Task strategy constitutes a fourth, cognitive mediator. Ability, commitment, feedback, task complexity, and situational constraints are all possible moderators of the goal-setting/performance relationship.

Locke and Latham erected their theory on a foundation of important empirical work, conducted in real-world workplaces and the laboratory.²⁰ Latham and Kinne²¹ found, for example, that logging crews assigned a specific and difficult goal were significantly more productive (and had better job attendance) than a similar crew that were merely urged to do their best. Such improvement remained even when workers were paid by the hour, and not on a piecework basis.²² These findings also held true in the case of more abstract occupations, such as research

and development²³ and managerial planning.²⁴ Laboratory research has replicated these findings in such basic domains as memory,²⁵ mathematical ability,²⁶ and reaction time.²⁷ Further investigation revealed that participation in goal-setting clearly bolsters understanding of strategy.²⁸ Pham and Taylor have begun to decompose the process of goal-attainment (through proximal goals), and to study its causal structure.²⁹ University students were asked to imagine either the goal of doing well on an upcoming midterm, or the process required to attain a good mark. Following this mental simulation, participants wrote down the contents of their imaginings. Students who engaged in process-simulation performed significantly better on the test than those who merely imagined the positive outcome. This improvement appeared to be a consequence of study-plan formation and execution on the part of the successful group, as well as a decrease in exam-related anxiety. Additional basic research has helped establish that fantasizing about a desired future (compared to a less valuable present) helps tag desired future states with positive affect, mediated as they are by expectations of success.³⁰ The importance of proximal goals has also been investigated. They appear particularly important in uncertain circumstances, where many variables must be considered, and where longer-term goals may have to be constantly evaluated, in light of rapidly changing circumstances. Success at proximal goals also seems capable of enhancing distal goal commitment.³¹

Conclusions

Goal-setting has multiple benefits. Such benefits do not appear bound by conventional categorical domains, as they encompass psychological well being, physical health, cognitive ability and task performance. Furthermore, the process by which such goal-setting exerts its effects appears broadly generalized. Establishing difficult, specific goals can facilitate performance in an unrelated domain (such as academic achievement). Likewise, comprehension of larger organizational goals (relatively removed from individual task aims) reduces the personal strain suffered by workers.

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