



The Importance of Goal Disengagement in Adaptive Self-Regulation: When Giving Up is Beneficial

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This article develops the argument that goal disengagement forms an essential aspect of effective self-regulation. The argument derives from a consideration of processes inherent in the life-span development of the individual, as well as processes inherent in the moment-to-moment regulation of action. Evidence is reviewed to support the idea that goal disengagement can be beneficial to psychological well-being. In addition, the article addresses the nature of disengagement. It is argued that disengagement requires a person to withdraw not only effort but also commitment from unattainable goals, and is most adaptive if it leads to pursuing new meaningful goals. The paper also discusses the manner in which various aspects of the self might support or hinder the disengagement process. The paper closes by addressing the break point between goal engagement and disengagement and suggesting several directions for future research.

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To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven:
A time to get and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away.

—Ecclesiastes 3.1, 6

Il faut savoir quand s'arrêter. (One must know when to stop.)

—French Proverb

Discussions of optimal experience often emphasize the importance of commitment to personal goals and having confidence in their attainability (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Emmons, 1985; Taylor & Brown, 1988).¹ Commitment and confidence act together to foster persistence and perseverance, even in the face of great adversity. In this article, we argue that this is only part of the story, that an equally important role is played by processes that are precisely the *opposite* of those just described. Specifically, in what follows, we point to the critical role in life that is played by doubt and disengagement—in short, by giving goals up (Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2000; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999). Giving up has a bad reputation in Western thought. “Winners never quit and quitters never win” is the credo of American sports and business alike. We argue, however, that everyone must quit sometimes. No one goes through a lifetime without confronting an insoluble problem. Indeed, we take the position here that disengagement is a necessity—a natural and indispensable aspect of personal development and effective self-regulation.

This article is organized into three sections. The first section is theoretical, addressing the beneficial role played by disengagement in successful self-regulation. In the second section, we review empirical evidence from studies examining processes of disengagement. The final section raises additional issues related to disengagement for future research.

Theoretical Considerations

Several areas of psychology contain logical bases for the idea that disengagement is a critical aspect of life. The areas that make this case range from the long-term, broad-scope analyses of life-span development to the shorter-term and narrower analysis of day-to-day and moment-to-moment action. Some of these bases are considered in the following sections.

Life-Span Development

Human beings have a vast potential for what they can become and accomplish in a lifetime. They are active agents who optimize their lives by making adaptive decisions about their future development (Heckhausen, 1999; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). Because time and individual resources are limited, however, successful development requires not only that we make important choices with respect to which goals to pursue, but also concerning which ones to give up and when (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). From the perspective of life-span psychology, there are a number of important factors that dictate how and which goals are chosen, and when it is appropriate to give up on goals that cannot be achieved.

One reason individuals sometimes abandon their goals relates to the biological resources that are available across the life span (Baltes, Cornelius, & Nesselroade, 1979; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). During childhood and adolescence, cognitive and physical abilities increase. In early adulthood, physical development plateaus and then declines in old and very old age. This cycle of growth and decline in development imposes limits on what goals are achievable and which ones must be

relinquished at any given point in the life course. For example, attaining a world record time in the 100-meter dash might be feasible at the age of 20 but would be futile for either a 10- or an 80-year-old individual. The attainment of specific goals might also be limited by the genetic potential of the individual. For example, becoming a professional athlete is improbable for persons who do not possess the genetically determined physical attributes required by a particular sport. Put more simply, some goals will be out of reach no matter how hard one tries.

Life-span psychologists and life course sociologists also emphasize that all societies have age-graded systems and norms, which constrain and provide a scaffold for life-course patterns (Hagestad, 1990; Heckhausen, 1999). These patterns provide predictability and structure at both individual and societal levels. Societies define normative ages for important life events and transitions, sometimes referred to as “developmental tasks” (Havighurst, 1973). The prototypical case of this phenomenon is entering into and exiting from the work force, both of which are largely shaped by social institutions. Thus, people might have to abandon some goals because of sociostructural and age-normative constraints (e.g., older people might have to abandon the goal of continuing to work).

Goals also have to be abandoned at times because life-course processes channel people’s lives into biographical tracks. An example is professional specialization, which yields ever-increasing levels of expertise in the chosen field, while making it increasingly difficult to keep up with alternatives. Within the chosen developmental track, functioning is optimized, while maintenance of alternative tracks becomes increasingly difficult, and crossovers to alternative life tracks virtually impossible.

Another critical constraint is the limit placed by the time span of the individual life. Whatever is to be achieved or experienced in life has to be done in a finite period of time, typically less than 80 years. Because the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and expertise takes time (Ericsson & Charness, 1994), the individual is constrained by the extent to which functioning can be maximized in multiple domains. Moreover, because there are absolute limits to the amount of time available to live one’s life, there are limits on one’s ability to effectively shift from one domain to another. At any given point in an individual’s life, the anticipated amount of time left to live may shape goal-seeking in important ways (e.g., Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). An example is career planning near retirement age. Such plans rely, at least implicitly, on projections about the person’s longevity. There inevitably comes a point in the life course beyond which one has to settle for what one has, rather than pursue possible career changes.

These various arguments can be summarized as follows: Because human life is short and resources are limited, people must make decisions about where, and how much, to invest those resources. Thus, people have to selectively invest their resources into specific life paths (see also Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Sometimes an activity is begun that proves not to be worth sustaining, given the multiple constraints on the person’s life, or the changing nature of the person’s sociostructural environment. In such cases, the activity—the goal—must be abandoned. This lets the person expend the resources to good effect in other domains of life.

Self-Regulation of Action

Processes surrounding goal disengagement also play a prominent role in theories focusing on the self-regulation of action over a more limited time span. Theories that have been derived from the expectancy-value motivational tradition typically assume

that people who expect success continue to exert efforts when encountering obstacles or constraints (e.g., Atkinson, 1964; Bandura, 1977, 1997; Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1998; Feather, 1982; Klinger, 1975; Kukla, 1972; Scheier & Carver, 1985; Seligman, 1991; Wortman & Brehm, 1975; Wright & Brehm, 1989). In contrast, people who sufficiently doubt that they can carry out their actions successfully are more likely to withdraw effort from the attempt, and even to abandon the goal itself.

Some theories have begun to recognize that misguided persistence might have undesirable consequences. For example, Brockner (1992) studied a phenomenon labeled as “entrapment,” that describes escalation of commitment to a failing course of action in organizational settings. In a similar vein, Baumeister and Scher (1988) analyzed a person’s (poor) judgment processes that might result in misguided persistence and self-defeating behavior. In addition, research on coping has demonstrated the maladaptive function of problem-focused coping in people who confront constrained opportunities for goal attainment (Vitaliano et al., 1990). Finally, Taylor (1991) discussed the adaptive capacities of human beings who are confronted with negative events. In her review she argued that, following a phase of mobilization, individuals tend to minimize the emotional consequences of negative events in order to maintain a positive view.

Although the described approaches start to address the importance of disengagement, most theories have treated giving up as an undesired response to difficulty. The emphasis in interpreting giving up has generally been on the failure event per se. Indeed, giving up has sometimes been equated with “helplessness,” in which the person subsequently fails to engage in adaptive efforts toward a variety of goals (cf. Seligman, 1975; Wortman & Brehm, 1975). Further thought makes it apparent, however, that this is too simple a picture.

An important element of complexity is added by making a distinction between the giving up of effort and giving up of commitment to the goal (Figure 1). Reducing effort while remaining committed to a goal has clear adverse consequences. It generates great distress (cf. Carver & Scheier, 1990). Effort may stop altogether, and the person becomes stuck in the bind of not trying, yet being unable to turn away

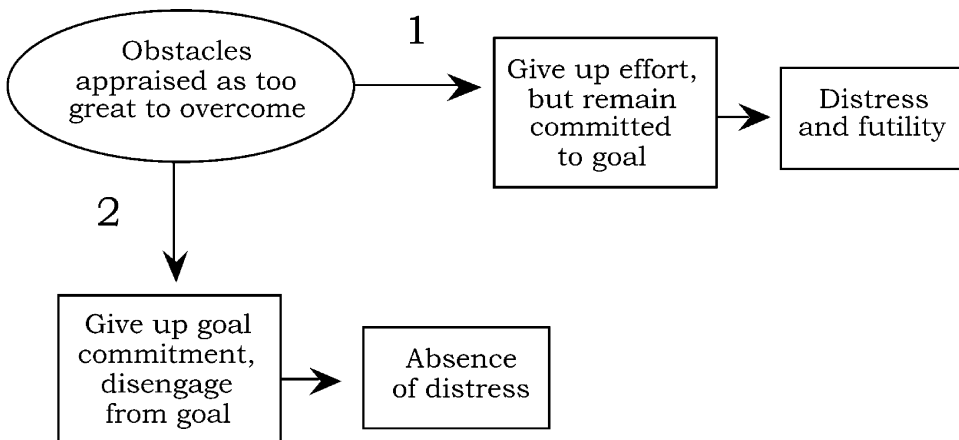


FIGURE 1 Consequences of two responses to the perception that a goal is unattainable. (1) Giving up effort while remaining committed to the goal results in distress and feelings of futility. (2) Giving up one’s commitment to the goal, in contrast, removes the basis for such feelings.

psychologically (cf. Nesse, 2000). If the person can disengage from commitment to the goal, however, the failure does not have these consequences (Carver & Scheier, 1998, Ch. 11). If the person is no longer committed to the unattainable goal, there is no basis for distress over the fact that the goal cannot be attained.

Central to most models of self-regulation is the notion that people live life by identifying goals for themselves and working and behaving in ways to attain these goals. The goals themselves can vary on a number of dimensions—for example, their content, their level of concreteness, and whether they are approach versus avoidance goals (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1998; Coats, Janoff-Bulmann, & Alpert, 1996; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997; Powers, 1973; Zirkel & Cantor, 1990). Some of the goals that people pursue reflect biological programming (e.g., finding water when thirsty). Others stem from dreams and fantasies of what might be (e.g., becoming famous and rich). Some goals are very concrete (e.g., take out the garbage), others are more abstract and ephemeral (e.g., be a successful parent). Regardless of their origin and nature, goals are seen in this view as providing the structure that define people's lives, imbuing lives with meaning, both in the short run and in the long run.

Goals are thus important to peoples' self-definitions. Moreover, self-relevant goals might structure people's daily lives in terms of the choices that are made, the activities that are pursued, and the manner in which events are interpreted (Cantor, 1994, Cantor et al., 1991). But what makes one goal more important than another? For one thing, goals vary in their level of abstraction within a person, forming a hierarchy. Although the hierarchy of goals can change over time, we generally assume that (other things being equal) the higher in this hierarchy a particular goal is, the more important it is—the more central to the overall sense of self. Concrete behavioral goals acquire their importance from the fact that their attainment serves the attainment of the more abstract goals (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1998; Powers, 1973; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). This way of thinking about behavior (indeed, about the self) nicely assimilates the fact that people engage in disparate actions to satisfy the same higher-order desire (e.g., different paths to good health: exercise, healthful eating, getting enough sleep). Further, the stronger and more direct is the link between a concrete goal and the deepest values of the self, the more important is that concrete goal.

Trivial goals are easy to disengage from. Important ones are hard to disengage from, because doing so creates a large failure with respect to higher-level core values of the self. For example, someone whose core sense of self revolves around being a patron of the arts would find it very hard to stop going to plays, concerts, and the ballet.

Some of the disengagements that take place in a person's life involve scaling back from a loftier goal in a given domain by adjusting her or his standard to a less demanding one (Path 2 in Figure 2, which is an elaboration of Figure 1). This type of disengagement is limited in the sense that the person is not leaving the domain. By giving up in a small way, the person keeps trying to move ahead and does *not* give up in a larger way (cf. Sprangers & Schwartz, 1999). The person thus retains the sense of purpose in activities of that domain. For example, a person who wants to buy a new car might come to realize that a new car is too expensive and consequently adjust her or his standard downward and decide to look for a used car.

Another form of "small" disengagement relates to time-limited disengagement. If a person has doubts about attaining a goal, but expects the opportunities for goal attainment to improve over time (e.g., having a child in a couple of years), the person might disengage and put the goal on hold. This might indeed be an adaptive process,

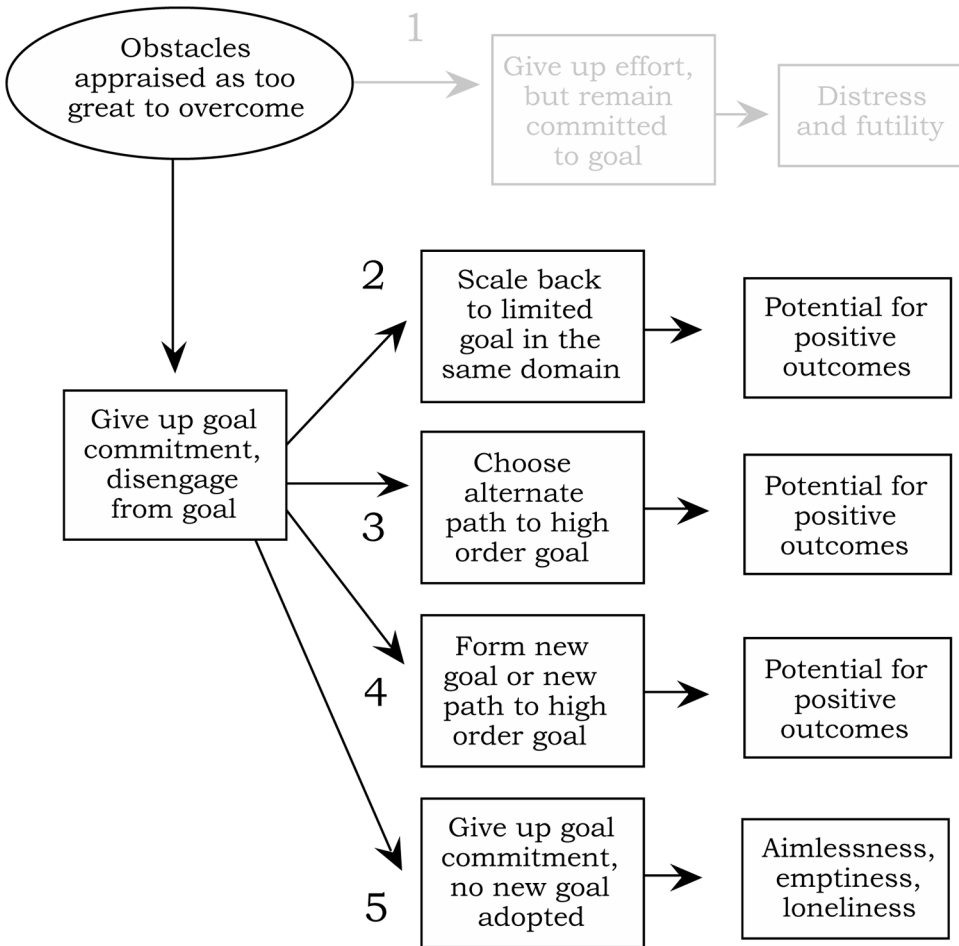


FIGURE 2 Consequences of four potential patterns of disengaging from a previously held goal (building on Figure 1). (2) Giving up a goal commitment by scaling back one's aspirations in the same domain produces a situation in which positive outcomes and feelings are again possible. (3) Giving up a goal commitment and choosing an alternative path to the same higher-order value also produces a situation in which positive outcomes and feelings are possible. (4) Giving up a goal commitment and choosing a new goal also produces a situation in which positive outcomes and feelings are possible. (5) Giving up commitment to the goal without turning to another goal, however, results in feelings of emptiness.

given that the opportunities for the attainment of specific life tasks often change significantly with time and age (e.g., Heckhausen, 1999).

As just noted, the notion of hierarchicality also conveys the sense that there are usually many paths to higher-order values. If progress in one pathway is impeded, it is often possible to shift one's efforts to a different pathway (Path 3 in Figure 2; see also Snyder, 1994; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Consider, for example, a person who values being an environmentalist. If a chronic illness prevented such a person from engaging in her regular volunteer work, she might compensate by increasing her charitable contributions.

It will be apparent from this discussion that many instances of goal disengagement occur in service of maintaining continued efforts toward higher-order goals. This is particularly obvious regarding concrete goals for which disengagement has little cost: People remove themselves from blind alleys, give up plans that have been disrupted by unexpected events, and try again when circumstances change.

The same is also true with regard to certain goals that are deeply connected to the self. Sometimes, even higher-order goals cannot be attained any longer. For example, a spouse might die (Cleiren, 1993; Orbuch, 1992; Stroebe, Stroebe, & Hansson, 1993) and long-term careers plans might turn out to be unsuccessful. In addition, there might be some situations (e.g., certain kinds of traumatic events) that make it difficult and threatening for a person to take up an alternative path to the same goal. In such situations, people have to step outside their existing framework and develop new goals altogether (Figure 2, Path 4). There are many ways in which this can occur, but we think these situations often have something in common. We believe that the newly adopted activity or value will be one that usually contributes to the expression of, or a complement to, some preexisting core aspect of the self (Carver & Scheier, 1999). For example, consider an altruistic person who worked to help other people manage their lives (e.g., a social worker or a lawyer). If this person could not continue to work because of an accident or forced retirement, the person might adopt new goals such as engaging in community activities or pursuing volunteer work in a social rights group (which might satisfy a core aspect of the self, such as being altruistic, in a different way).

It should be mentioned that people might also attain a life goal symbolically, even if it is impossible to attain the goal in fact (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). For example, a person might select and use a socially recognizable symbol (e.g., a title), in order to compensate for failing to achieve a self-relevant goal. It should be noted, however, that self-completion as described by Wicklund and colleagues (Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982) relates more strongly to interpersonal rather than intrapersonal processes. That is, the primary purpose of self-completion in that theory is to create a particular impression on other persons in the social environment. Thus, the intent is to create a particular public image, not to deal intrapsychically with unattainable goals.

More generally, disengagement appears to be an adaptive response *when it leads to the taking up of other goals or enhances the probability of achieving remaining goals because it frees up resources for their attainment*. By taking up an attainable alternative, the person remains engaged in the pursuit of a goal that has meaning for the self, and life continues to have purpose (Ryff, 1989; Scheier & Carver, 2001). High levels of purpose, in turn, can be expected to promote a person's long-term development (cf. Goldenberg, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2000; Ryff, 1989). Another potential benefit of engagement with a new goal may relate to reduction of a person's failure-related thoughts and emotions. That is, a person who decides to pursue a new goal focuses on the positive aspects of this new goal rather than on the prior failure (e.g., Gollwitzer, Heckhausen, & Steller, 1990; Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999).

Not every disengagement leads to the taking up of a new goal, however, because sometimes there appears to be no alternative goal to take up. This is perhaps the worst situation, where there is nothing to pursue, nothing to take the place of what is seen as unattainable. If commitment to the unattainable goal remains, the result is considerable distress (Figure 2, Path 1). If the commitment wanes, but nothing is there to take its place, the result is emptiness (Figure 2, Path 5).

Evidence

Is there evidence that disengaging from a previously adopted goal ever has positive consequences? Although the evidence is somewhat circumstantial, in this section we review some of the studies that have found support for this general line of reasoning. Wrosch and Heckhausen (1999), for example, studied groups of younger and older persons who had recently experienced a separation in their relationships. It was assumed that the older persons in the study would face sharply reduced opportunities for establishing new intimate relationships, thereby making disengagement from the general domain of partnership-related goals adaptive for older persons. The results showed that older persons in the study had disengaged from partnership goals more fully than had younger persons, as reflected in the number of partnership goals they reported. Perhaps more importantly, longitudinal data showed that deactivation of partnership goals predicted improvement of emotional well-being in older participants (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999).

Conceptually similar results have been reported by Schulz, Wrosch, Yee, Heckhausen, and Whitmer (1998) in a very different domain. Schulz *et al.* studied health-relevant goals among a group of older adults who differed in their degree of functional impairment. They asked participants to indicate the extent to which they dwelled on health goals that they deemed unattainable. Although this variable had no association with psychological well-being among those whose functional impairment was minimal, it reliably predicted greater distress among participants who were more severely disabled. Thus, mentally disengaging from unattainable health goals seemed to provide a benefit to those whose health status was most severely threatened. Positive effects of accommodation to critical life transitions have also been reported by King, Scollon, Ramsey, and Williams (2000). They interviewed parents of children with Down Syndrome and predicted the parents' stress-related growth and ego development. Part of the accommodation process involved a paradigmatic shift that was defined as an essential change in response to the environment. Parents who scored high on accommodation reported particularly high levels of stress-related growth and ego development. In addition, they reported increased stress-related growth over time.

Moskowitz, Folkman, Collette, and Vittinghoff (1996) have also examined disengagement processes in the health domain, but from a different angle. In so doing, their study provided support to the notion that small-scale disengagement can facilitate moving forward in broader ways. Their study examined coping and well-being in couples in which one partner was becoming ill and dying from AIDS. Some of the healthy participants initially had the goal of overcoming their partners' illness and continuing to have active lives together. As the illness progressed and it became apparent that goal wouldn't be met, it was not uncommon for the healthy partners to scale back their aspirations. Now the goal was, for example, to do more limited activities during the course of a day. Choosing a more limited and manageable goal helped ensure that it would be possible to move successfully toward it. The result was that even in those difficult circumstances, the person experienced more success than would otherwise have been the case and remained engaged behaviorally with efforts to move forward with life.

In a similar vein, Tunali and Power (1993) have discussed how parents cope with the stress of having handicapped children. They argue that when people are in such an inescapable situation, where their basic needs are under threat, they may "redefine what constitutes fulfillment of that need, and . . . develop alternative means of

achieving it” (p. 950). Consistent with this line of reasoning, they found that mothers of autistic children tended to downgrade the importance of career success in defining their life satisfaction, and upgrade the importance of being a good parent, in comparison to mothers who did not have an autistic child (cf. Carver & Scheier, 2000; Sprangers & Schwartz, 1999). Rated importance of being a successful parent was also strongly related to life satisfaction among the mothers of autistic children.

As noted earlier, opportunities for goal attainment often relate to the normative structure of the life course. Individuals who are “off-time” (Neugarten, 1969) with regard to their goals often cannot take advantage of supportive biological, societal, and social conditions for goal attainment. Thus, these persons may face less favorable opportunities for goal realization than persons who are “on-time.” Research examining the consequences of (non)normative life events has supported this notion by showing, for example, that non-normative historical events (Elder, 1974) and “off-time” life events (Ryff & Dunn, 1985) may be related to maladaptive development. People who face non-normative life situations that involve unfavorable opportunities for goal attainment, however, might improve adjustment and development if they are able to disengage. A prototypical example of such a situation in early midlife is the biological clock of childbearing. Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Fleeson (2001) studied women who had passed the deadline for having their own children. Among women whose biological clock had run out, those who failed to disengage from the goal of having their own children reported particularly high levels of depressive symptomatology.

A final set of studies examining the adaptive role of goal disengagement has been recently conducted by our own research group (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2002; Wrosch & Scheier, 2002). We have explicitly started to examine the proposed beneficial effects of goal disengagement empirically. Specifically, using goal adjustment scales constructed explicitly for the purpose, we measured people’s tendencies to disengage from unattainable goals by asking them how difficult it was for them to withdraw effort and to relinquish commitment from unattainable goals. We also assessed goal re-engagement by asking people to indicate to us the extent to which they could identify, commit to, and pursue alternative goals when they were confronted with unattainable goals (Wrosch et al., 2002).

In a first study, we examined relations between goal disengagement, goal re-engagement, and subjective well-being in college students (Wrosch et al., 2002). We expected that the transition to a university setting might require students to restructure important life goals. In particular, separation from longstanding friends and family, unexpected failure in academic tasks, and time-consuming and resources-intensive responsibilities at school might result in situations in which important life goals were no longer attainable.

The results showed that participants’ capacities to reduce effort and to relinquish commitment to constrained goals were related to low levels of perceived stress and intrusive thoughts and high levels of self-mastery (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). In addition, the capacity to pursue alternative goals was significantly related to high levels of self-mastery and purpose in life and to low levels of perceived stress and intrusive thoughts.

In a second study, we examined whether goal disengagement becomes even more important when people face extremely challenging life circumstances. To study this hypothesis, we administered the previously mentioned goal adjustment scales to 20 parents of children with cancer and 25 parents of healthy children (Wrosch et al., 2002). The study also included a measure of depressive symptomatology. We

reasoned that the diagnosis of a life-threatening disease of their own children may force parents to give up some important life goals (e.g., giving up career goals to spend more time with their children). Thus, we expected an inverse correlation to emerge in the data set between disengagement and depressive symptomatology, particularly among parents of children with cancer. Consistent with these expectations, the study results showed that both goal disengagement and goal re-engagement predicted low levels of depressive symptomatology, particularly so among parents whose children were diagnosed with cancer (Wrosch et al., 2002).

A final data set that has been recently collected examined the experience and management of life-regrets among college students (Wrosch & Scheier, 2002). We asked the participants to report their most severe commission regrets (i.e., regrets over things they had done). They also reported the amount of negative affect and intrusive thoughts that they experienced with respect to the regrettable behavior. In addition, we asked the participants to report whether the negative consequences of the regrettable behavior could in fact be undone. Finally, to obtain a measure of disengagement, we asked the participants to report whether they were putting forth effort and whether they were committed toward undoing the negative consequences of the regrettable behavior.

We expected that disengagement would be related to low levels of negative affect and intrusive thoughts, but only among people who perceived low opportunities to undo the negative consequences of their regrets. That is, we expected disengagement to be beneficial only when the participants believed that nothing could be done to undo the regretted behaviors. In support for our hypotheses, disengagement was related to low levels of negative affect and intrusive thoughts in people who perceived low opportunities to undo the negative consequences of their regrettable behaviors. In contrast, disengagement was statistically unrelated to negative affect and intrusive thoughts in participants who perceived favorable opportunities to undo the negative consequences of their regrettable behaviors.

In sum, the reported studies show that people differ in their approach to unattainable goals. Individual differences in both disengagement and re-engagement independently predicted high levels of well-being and low levels of stress, depression, and intrusions if people confronted unattainable goals. Thus, the capacities to withdraw effort and to relinquish commitment from unattainable goals and to identify, commit to, and pursue alternative goals seem to represent important factors in adaptive self-regulation.

Nature, Ease, and Timing of Disengagement

In the preceding pages, we have tried to make a case that goal disengagement is a natural part of the process of living. We have also presented some data supporting the idea that goal-disengagement can at times be beneficial. In the sections that follow, we address some additional issues bearing on this idea. We expect these issues to represent possible pathways for future research in the area of goal disengagement and self-regulation.

What is Disengagement?

One set of questions concerns the nature of disengagement. Earlier we suggested that there are two discernible aspects to disengagement—reduction of effort and relinquishment of commitment. Reduction of effort may mean a lessening in energy

directed toward goal attainment; the person keeps trying, but not as hard (see also Atkinson & Birch's, 1970, discussion of changes in the strength of action tendencies). Alternatively, reduction of effort can be more complete, a total cessation of goal-directed activity.

Relinquishment of commitment, in contrast, seems to involve a reduction in the importance that is attached to the goal. Reducing the goal's importance, helping redefine it as not necessary for satisfaction in life (cf. Sprangers & Schwartz, 1999), allows the person to accommodate to the inability to reach the goal (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990). Decommittment would always seem to involve some reorganization of the person's self-concept, then, in that it always entails a change (a devaluation) in at least one element of the self-concept. Thus goal disengagement and the pursuit of new and meaningful goals seem to influence the content of the person's self-concept and identity as well as the manner in which the self is organized. However, self-related processes might also influence the disengagement process, as discussed in more detailed below.

A psychological construct that is conceptually related to our definition of goal disengagement has been described as secondary control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Secondary control integrates different facets of self-protective processes (e.g., goal devaluation, attributions, or social comparisons; see Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Wills, 1981) and refers to the idea that people control their *reactions* to some stressors by accommodating to them. Indeed, some processes identified with the term secondary control (e.g., goal devaluation) are virtually synonymous with what we are characterizing here as changes in goal commitment.

However, other processes related to secondary control (e.g., attributions or social comparisons) have to be distinguished from disengagement for at least two reasons. First, they would seem to foster the conditions under which goal devaluation might occur. For instance, people who engage in social comparison and conclude that the unattainable goal is out of reach for everyone in their age and gender group may thereby have an easier time devaluing and decommitting from the goal.

Second, certain self-protective processes might become important only after decommitment occurs. Given that goal decommitment might potentially result in regret (e.g., omission regrets; Gilovich & Medvec, 1995), self-protective attributions and social comparisons can be expected to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with goal decommitment (e.g., Festinger, 1957). In turn, such processes might prevent a person from creating counterfactuals about what could have happened and thus avoid the experience of further life regrets (for counterfactuals and regret, see Gilovich & Medvec, 1995; Roese, 1997). Initial evidence for this idea has been provided by a study demonstrating that self-protective attributions relate to low levels of omission regrets in older adults (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2002). Considering that negative consequences of regrettable behaviors are harder to undo in old age (e.g., not having pursued a certain career), the study demonstrated that self-protective attributions play a relevant role in managing the negative emotional consequences of unattainable goals.

What Facilitates Disengagement?

Another issue has to do with the fact that some people have an easier time disengaging from unattainable goals than others. This variation is interesting in light of suggestions made by "energization theory" (Wright & Brehm, 1989; Wright, Brehm,

Crutcher, Evans, & Jones, 1990), which assumes that as goals become more unattainable, effort energization toward those goals universally subsides. Indeed, it seems reasonable that human beings have developed the general capacity to withdraw effort from pursuing a goal if they perceive that the goal cannot be reached. However, studies reviewed here (e.g., Wrosch et al., 2002) make clear that individuals can differ widely in their reactions to unattainable goals. In addition, our perspective suggests that disengagement consists of two different facets, reduction of effort and withdrawal of commitment. Perhaps withdrawal of effort occurs more automatically, as negative expectations regarding goal attainment become increasingly certain, whereas withdrawal of commitment occurs with greater difficulty. In light of empirical findings and theoretical considerations such as these, we argue that giving up on unattainable goals is not an easy task for everyone. Considering the potential detrimental effects of failed disengagement, it is thus important to determine the basis for individual differences in the success people exhibit disengaging from unattainable goals.

One class of factors might relate to self and personality processes. We have discussed earlier the possibility that self-protective processes (e.g., social comparisons) might facilitate the ease of disengagement. However, there are a host of additional factors that might make it easier (or more difficult) for a person to give up on an unattainable goal. For example, the clarity with which people anticipate the consequences of their goal pursuits might facilitate decommitment from a goal. In this regard, Atkinson and Birch (1978) have suggested that the degree of certainty that a particular action will produce negative consequences relates to disengagement. Other things being equal, someone who clearly perceives a goal to be unattainable should be more likely to disengage than a person whose perception is hazier.

In some respects, this would seem to be a question of how accurately the person can weigh available information about present and future constraints. However, people do not always weigh available information in a realistic way. For example, positively biased judgments about future opportunities and constraints, also described as “positive illusions” (Taylor, 1989), are very common and might promote high levels of persistence. Thus, it is easy to understand why giving up might be difficult if people tend to hold positively biased judgment.

An example of how this might influence behavior stems from the experience of gambling. In this case, letting go by getting up and leaving the gambling table might avoid extremely negative consequences such as losing substantial financial resources. Unfortunately, gamblers tend to transform their losses into “near wins” (Gilovich, 1983), thus maintaining positive illusions, making it harder to quit.

A line of research that addressed such issues of misguided persistence (e.g., Baumeister & Scher, 1988) has argued that positively biased judgments of attainability might relate to a host of factors. For example, research has shown that people do not always take relevant past experiences into account when they predict future outcomes, a phenomenon that has been labeled as “planning fallacy” (Buehler, Griffin, & Ross, 1994). In addition, there might be other biases that play a role in a person’s estimate of the likelihood of the occurrence of a future event. For example, Sherman, Zehner, Johnson, and Hirt (1983) reported that people who have already tried to explain why a specific event might occur will, in the future, experience a high likelihood that the event will in fact take place.

We would also note that people vary in their awareness of their behavior, values, and feelings, along a dimension termed private self-consciousness (Carver & Scheier, 1985; Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; Scheier & Carver, 1981). Persons high in

private self-consciousness are more likely than those low in private self-conscious to withdraw effort when expectancies regarding task outcomes are unfavorable (Scheier & Carver, 1982; see also Carver, Antoni, & Scheier, 1985). Perhaps private self-consciousness facilitates disengagement from unattainable goals more generally, by increasing the person's cognizance of the fact that further effort is futile.

A role may also be played by the manner in which a person orients to success and failure. For instance, earlier work on motivation has shown that people who are motivated to avoid failure are less persistent in their goal-related behavior after the experience of failure than people who are success motivated (Weiner, 1965). Thus, failure motivation might facilitate disengagement from unattainable goals.

In addition, people's representations about possible future self-development might be related to the ease of disengagement. Markus and Ruvolo (1989) discussed the idea of possible selves, in which the person constructs or imagines future roles that might be occupied and behaviors that might be performed. Such self-related representation of positive future development should provide the individual with available alternatives to pursue. It seems likely that substituting a new path for an obstructed one is easier if the person has clearly specified alternative goals. In addition, self-representation of feared future selves might motivate a person to disengage from goals (cf. Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

We should note that we are not alone in suggesting that the availability of alternative goals may make disengagement easier. For example, earlier work on achievement motivation also emphasized that changes in behavior can be facilitated by the availability of alternative activities that were high in substitution value (Atkinson & Birch, 1970). Consistent with the idea that the availability of alternative goals makes goal disengagement easier, Aspinwall and Richter (1999) have demonstrated that the presence of alternatives results in earlier withdrawal (faster disengagement) from unsolvable tasks. Similarly, Wrosch and Heckhausen (1999) have shown that alternative social goals help people to adapt successfully to the negative emotional consequences of partnership separation. It would be interesting to explore in future research the factors associated with the availability of alternative goals. For example, Gregory, Cialdini, and Carpenter (1982) have shown that the ease with which people imagine possible future scenarios is predictive of the likelihood that these imagined scenarios in fact take place. Maybe imagining future scenarios facilitates the pursuit of alternative goals.

Although we cannot address in this article the complete set of self- or person-related variables that might moderate the disengagement process, we would like to point to one last facet, which involves the attributional patterns that people adopt towards their goal pursuits. Dweck and Leggett (1988) have drawn the distinction between holding an incremental versus an entity understanding of an ability or personal characteristic. A person who perceives that constraints on goal pursuits are mainly a consequence of his or her own effort (i.e., one who is an incremental theorist) might have difficulty perceiving the unattainability of a certain goal. Instead, the person might keep trying to make incremental progress toward goal-attainment by increasing her or his effort. In contrast, a person who attributes failure at goal-attainment to ability (i.e., one who is an entity theorist) might have an easier time accepting the ultimate unattainability of the goal. Such a person might reason, "If I don't have the ability why keep trying?"

Similar considerations should apply to the specific goals that people adopt (e.g., mastery vs. performance goals) on the basis of their implicit intelligence theory (e.g. Dweck & Leggett, 1988). For example, a person who holds specific mastery

goals might strive a longer time for goal attainment, although the goal is not attainable. Interestingly, Harackiewicz, Barron, Carter, Lehto, and Elliot (1997) have reported that mastery goals are unrelated to students' grades, whereas performance goals positively predict good grades. The null effect of mastery goals in the Harackiewicz et al. (1997) study might be related, at least partly, to the possibility that some students who hold this type of goal orientation do not easily disengage when they confront an unattainable goal. However, it should be noted that holding mastery goals can have other beneficial long-term consequences, such as keeping the person interested and engaged in a specific domain (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot 2000).

Beyond aspects of the person, there are other classes of factors influencing the ease of disengagement. For example, goals in which the person has already made greater behavioral investment should be harder to abandon than those in which less investment has been made, a phenomenon that is well known under a variety of labels (e.g., "sunk cost" or "entrapment"; see Arkes & Ayton, 1999; Brockner, 1992).

In a similar vein, the ease of goal disengagement can be expected to vary as a function of the person's location in the life course. As noted earlier, social constraints and biological limitations work hand in hand to provide rough guidelines about what major life goals to pursue and thereby determine a biographical track. A corollary of this principle is that the person must be able to disengage from goals that do not appear fruitful before investing large amounts of time and effort in them. For example, many young children aspire to become professional athletes, but most children's abilities are not commensurate with this goal. Accordingly, many children abandon this aspiration fairly early in life. Assuming that this decision comes early, the costs of disengaging are low because the investment of time and energy was limited, and the process of disengagement is relatively painless. In later life, goals pursued since childhood become more difficult to abandon, inasmuch as they have been pursued longer and have come to occupy a more central position in the person's life. For example, a student-athlete who has to decide whether to continue his football career or get an education may have great difficulty with the idea that he should abandon his playing career.

Finally, some goals may be more difficult to abandon than others because of the nature of the social environment. That is, social norms help determine what kind of goals people choose to pursue in certain situations and in certain periods of life (Hagestad, 1990; Neugarten, 1969). It may be hard to abandon a goal if others in your comparison group or culture see pursuit of that goal as normative and appropriate. People who are particularly sensitive to normative pressures—for example, those high in the need for social desirability, or high in public self-consciousness (cf. Carver & Scheier, 1985, 1998, Chapter 7; Scheier & Carver, 1981)—may find it especially difficult to disengage from socially mandated goals.

When to Struggle, and When to Give Up?

Our final point concerns the break point between engagement and disengagement. The argument can be made that responses to adversity fall into one of two categories (Carver & Scheier, 1981, 1998; Kukla, 1972; Wright & Brehm, 1989). One category consists of continued engagement with one's goal along with continued effort. The other category consists of disengagement and quitting. Just as rainwater falling on a mountain ridge ultimately flows to one side of the ridge or the other, so do behaviors ultimately flow to one of these classes of behavior or the other.

When confronting adversity, there is always a tension between these two opposing forces. We argue that effective self-regulation must embody both sets of processes, holding on and letting go (cf. Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1992). From this perspective it seems likely that a key to successful living is to know when to continue the struggle, and when giving up is the right response. On the one hand, it is important to preserve hope and hold on to desired values and goals when problems in life arise (e.g., Bandura, 1977; Scheier & Carver, 1985). When a goal is potentially realizable, even a limited giving up can be a mistake. It can keep the person from grasping something that is within reach, and it can erode the person's confidence regarding similar goals in the future. Thus, hope should be embraced for as long as possible. This might be particularly important if the goal is close to the core self of the person (e.g., intrinsically motivated goals; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

On the other hand, it is also important to accept the fact that valued goals must at times be abandoned, and the search begun for other more attainable goals to take their place. When the goal cannot be met, or even approximated, disengagement is the right response. In such a situation, disengagement helps the person avoid negative emotions and frees personal resources for application elsewhere. But it is not always easy to give-up, even when not giving up can have harmful long-term consequences. For example, a person might preserve hope by constructing hypothetical conditions under which the goal might still be attained. When it finally turns out that the goal can not be reached, and the person has not developed alternative meaningful goals along the way, the long-term consequences for a person's life might be quite detrimental, especially so if the person is older and has fewer options available.

But how long is too long? Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer to this question, although some approaches have proposed outcome criteria such as the extent to which engagement or disengagement strategies preserve the potential for primary control (cf. Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Clearly, questions involving holding on and letting go seem critical to the process of successful living, and research that helps us better understand when engagement most adaptively gives way to disengagement, for a particular person in a particular context, should receive high priority.

In considering this point, we suggest one more extrapolation from it. In helping people with difficulties in life, many clinical scientists and practitioners have focused on techniques to enhance people's engagement in the activities of life. This is certainly understandable, because many of the problems that people bring to clinical settings are problems in which the disengagement tendency predominates, in which quitting overpowers trying. However, there are also cases in which people are holding on too long to the unattainable, clinging to visions of reality that will never come to pass (cf. Nesse, 2000). These people need ways to get beyond those failed visions, and move to new challenges and opportunities. Clinicians should be as mindful of that need as they are of the other need, and techniques designed to foster disengagement should be recognized as an important part of the clinical armamentarium.

Conclusions

We have argued in this article that giving up on goals is a natural and important part of successful living. Such a view is implied both by theories of life-span development and by theories of the self-regulation of moment-to-moment action. Evidence to

date, though limited, is consistent with the idea that disengagement in some circumstances is useful and adaptive. In addition, some of the reported research (Wrosch & Scheier, 2002; Wrosch et al., 2002) has shown that it is indeed possible to operationalize and measure goal disengagement. This is an important issue for future research because it allows one to disentangle people's capacities for goal disengagement from associated facets of the self and the person.

We have also pointed to some potential candidates that might be related to people's capacities to disengage from unattainable goals, such as possible selves, perception of constraints, or attributional preferences. However, future research on goal disengagement should examine more comprehensively the nature of the self-related variables that facilitate or hinder disengagement from unattainable goals. It should be noted that goal disengagement can also change people's self-concepts, for better and for worse. Future research needs to identify the mechanisms underlying these changes, as well as to specify what it is that enables some of the changes to self-concept to be more beneficial than others. In a similar vein, we also need to develop a more elaborate understanding of the manner in which disengagement relates to the experience of regret. Finally, future research should study the break point when goal engagement loses its adaptive function and disengagement becomes the adaptive response. In doing so, research on disengagement might result in a knowledge base that can be used clinically to help people confront and disengage from unattainable goals. As the research agenda of psychological and behavioral scientists moves forward, we hope it will continue to be recognized that life has a dialectical quality—that disengagement plays a role, as well as persistence, in promoting successful living.

Notes

1. The importance of attainability of goals for optimal experience differs across different theoretical approaches. For example, Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) argued that a situation that involves both high levels of skills and challenges, described as "flow," might result in optimal individual experience.

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