

Having Long-Term Goals Is Important, but Research Suggests That We Should Enjoy the Little Things Too

Description

Greek philosopher Aristotle once argued that true well-being came from pursuing our best selves. On seeking to become the best versions of ourselves, maximizing our potential and acting in line with our deepest values and principles.

Of course, there are others, like Socrates' student Aristippus, who believed that the good life was all about doing things that are pleasant and enjoyable in the moment, and avoiding things that make us feel bad.

I think most of us have probably been drawn to each of these approaches to well-being at different times, but I'm guessing that you are more inclined to believe that Aristotle's way was the "right" approach. Like, sure, Aristippus's way is fun in the short-term, but the mature, grown-up way to do life is to be more focused on the long-term goals we have for ourselves.

Like doing scales, metronome practice, and recorded run-throughs for our upcoming recital instead of watching Netflix. Or eating egg whites and black beans for breakfast, instead of a dozen take-and-bake chocolate mini croissants.

So naturally, there's a ton of research out there on self-control. On how to realize our big goals and avoid being sidetracked by those pesky pleasure-seeking impulses that lead us to scarf down a pan of [Nutella fudge brownies](#) (as if Nutella-less brownies weren't calorically dense enough) on a Friday evening. Or get sucked down the [is-Mario-Kart-Live-Home-Circuit-worth-it-or-not](#) rabbit hole on a Thursday morning instead of writing a blog post (totally just a hypothetical example, of course...).

In fact, these fun, enjoyable diversions are often seen as being bad things. As failures of self-control. Things that we can indulge in only if they've been *earned*, by putting time into activities that are "better" for us and more directly serve our long-term interests. Like having a cookie after eating our broccoli.

But then again, there *is* that saying "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

So what's the deal? When it comes to being in a good place mentally, physically, and emotionally – perhaps especially during a stressful year like 2020 – was Aristotle right? Or was Aristippus onto something?

Research on well-being

A pair of European researchers ([Bernecker & Becker, 2020](#)) recruited over 500 participants to take part in

two studies about well-being.

The process was a little different in each study, but essentially, participants completed various assessments designed to measure well-being in the workplace, well-being more generally in their lives¹, satisfaction with life², physical indicators of distress, as well as depression and anxiety.

They were also asked to complete a self-control inventory³, as well as the Trait Hedonic Capacity Scale, which was created to measure how capable a person is of pursuing “hedonic goals” and to what degree the responsible, grown-up voice inside of them made it difficult to enjoy themselves when they were trying to relax or do something fun. Which included questions like “I often do what I feel like doing”, “In my spare time, I can ‘switch off’ well”, “Thoughts about my work sometimes prevent me from enjoying pleasant activities and moments”, and “I often think after the fact that I should have enjoyed the moment more”.

So what did they find?

Self-control vs. “trait hedonic capacity”

Not surprisingly, self-control *was* related to general well-being and life satisfaction.

However, “trait hedonic capacity” – or participants’ ability to engage in pleasurable, relaxing activities, and actually enjoy themselves in the moment – *was even more* related to general well-being and life satisfaction (by about *twice* as much, FWIW).

This aligns with previous research in areas ranging from work stress and burnout to more clinical aspects of mood and depression, which have found that people with the highest levels of well-being, mental, physical, and emotional health tend to pursue *two* paths to well-being. Like, sure, they are great at using self-control and other strategies to pursue their long-term goals. But they *also* make time for activities that are relaxing and enjoyable right now.

Makes perfect sense, right?

What’s interesting though, is that for many of us, pursuing both paths might be much easier said than done.

Trying to relax

The researchers conducted another study in which they asked 148 participants to spend 10 minutes relaxing (listening to soothing music, etc.), and to keep track of any thoughts that popped into their heads which made it more difficult to relax.

Before coming to the lab, however, half of the participants were reminded of all of the things they probably ought to be doing, by asking them to name three goals that they wanted to pursue in the next few months, as well as specific steps they could take to make progress towards these goals.

And what did they find?

The role of intrusive thoughts

Well, you know those times when you try to do something relaxing, like going on a hike with friends, but the voice in your head keeps randomly appearing out of nowhere to give you a guilt trip about how you ought to be practicing your part for tomorrow's rehearsal instead? And how this totally ruins the moment, making it difficult to enjoy the crisp, fall weather and company of your friends?

Yeah, the gist of what the researchers found, is that these types of spontaneous thoughts about how we're not pursuing our long-term goals in the moment is a big part of why we often struggle to truly relax during our downtime.

So what are we to take away from all of this?

Takeaways

Well, I read about a [study](#) recently which found that a lot of us feel guilty taking a lunch break during work hours, and often work straight through the day without a break.

And I don't know if there's any data out there to say if things have gotten even more this way since the pandemic began, but I do get the sense that this is the direction in which we've trended in the last 6 months, with many feeling a need to be extra productive and get even more done than usual.

Yet studies like the one above seem to suggest that all-work-and-no-play may not be sustainable, nor optimal in the long run. And that even if we don't feel like we can afford to spend an afternoon building an elaborate obstacle course for the dog with the kids, it may be really, really important for us to give ourselves permission to "switch off" from work, and engage fully in activities that are fun or enjoyable for their own sake.

To create, savor, enjoy, and appreciate the tiny bright spots in each day. Even if it feels like the most important thing is to put the blinders on and focus on the next item on our to-do list.

Like allowing ourselves 15 minutes to try an [awe walk](#).

Or scheduling a 24-hour no-practicing-allowed period during the week (that one of my teachers once recommended).

Or maybe even something like the positivity challenge⁴. Which is where you pick a single positive emotion

and go through your day looking for opportunities to either experience that emotion yourself, or help others around you experience some of the selected emotion. I know it may not seem like an especially profound exercise, but try it out for a few days, and you might be surprised. =) If you'd like to give it a go, here are 10 common positive emotions that positivity researcher Barbara Fredrickson describes in her book, *Positivity*:

- Joy
 - Gratitude
 - Serenity
 - Interest
 - Hope
 - Pride
 - Amusement
 - Inspiration
 - Awe
 - Love
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References

Bernecker, K., & Becker, D. (2020). Beyond Self-Control: Mechanisms of Hedonic Goal Pursuit and Its Relevance for Well-Being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 014616722094199. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220941998>

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