

GOAL PURSUIT

Brief No. 6



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This is the sixth brief related to the series, Emotional Well-Being: The Science and Practice of Feeling Well. In this brief, we explore goal pursuit, a component of emotional well-being.

Module 6 Objectives

By the end of Module 6, you will be able to:

1. Define goal pursuit and its connection to emotional well-being.
2. Understand the role of motivation and alignment with purpose in achieving goals.
3. Identify how to set and attain meaningful goals.

As a reminder, we define emotional well-being as:

Emotional well-being has many parts that capture how positive an individual feels generally, and about their life overall. It includes:

- **Experiential features:** emotional quality of everyday experiences
- **Reflective features:** life satisfaction, sense of meaning, and goal pursuit

These features occur in the context of culture, life circumstances, resources, and age¹.

What is goal pursuit?

Goal pursuit is “the ability or process of making one’s own choices and controlling one’s own life.”² In other words, it’s setting goals that help you adapt to and orient yourself to your environment. Goal pursuit is an important part of emotional well-being because it gives people something meaningful to work toward. When people set and try to reach goals, they often feel like their life has purpose and direction. This can make them feel happier and more satisfied with their lives.

Working toward goals also helps people feel more confident, especially when they see progress or achieve success. Even when goals are hard to reach, the process can help people learn new skills and find better ways to handle challenges.

Pursuing goals can also bring people closer to others, like when working on team projects or helping their community. Overall, having goals and working toward them can help people feel stronger, more hopeful, and more connected.

What factors influence goal pursuit?

When we think about the factors that influence goal pursuit, our motivation for achieving our goals and how our goals align with our purpose play a big role. Self-determination theory³ helps explain how our goals and the reasons behind them affect emotional well-being. We tend to feel better when we choose our own goals and how to reach them, rather than being told what to do. For example, earning more money feels more satisfying when it’s for personal reasons and done in a way that fits us rather than to meet other’s expectations.

There are two types of motivation:

- **Internal (intrinsic) motivation:** This is when you choose to do something because it’s enjoyable or meaningful.
- **External (extrinsic) motivation:** This is when you do something to get a reward or avoid punishment.

People with more internal motivation are more likely to reach their goals and feel happier. It also helps when goals match your personal values – working toward something you truly care about makes the effort more fulfilling.

“Rather than focusing on the *amount* of motivation, self-determination theory focuses on the *type* of motivation.
Edward Deci

How do I set and attain meaningful goals?

Psychologists have studied goal setting for many decades and typically define “good goals” as those created in a way that drives goal striving and achievement. We want to suggest that a “good goal” is not just one that you are more likely to achieve, but also when you do achieve it, benefits your emotional well-being.

You can use the SMART goals framework to set “good goals.”

SMART goals are:



Specific: What exactly do you want to do



Measurable: How will you track your progress?



Achievable: Is your goal realistic?



Relevant: Does the goal align with your overall plan?



Time-Bound: Does your goal have a deadline?

For example, you may have a goal to read more. A goal to “read more this summer” is very broad and likely to stall when life gets busy. A goal to “read 20 minutes 3 days per week this summer” is much “SMART”er! It’s clear what needs to be done and is more likely to feel achievable when life gets busy!

Your Turn!

Take out your Emotional Well-Being Toolkit and give the following activities a try.



Watch this [TED Talk⁴](#) on setting the right goals for success.

Take a few minutes to reflect after you’ve watched the video about how you might apply what you’ve learned to your life.



Explore this [worksheet](#) to practice drafting some “good goals” for yourself.

Find a spot where you can focus and give this process a try!

For a Deeper Dive

To learn more, check out the following resources:

Greater Good Science Center Magazine

[How to Choose Goals That Make You Come Alive](#)

This article discusses research on the components of well-being and how they can be used to choose goals that work for us.

TED-Ed

[How to Get Motivated Even When You Don’t Feel Like It](#)

This video discusses the psychology of internal and external motivation and how they contribute to our desire to set and achieve goals.

To cite this brief: Lyon, K., Lopez, L. T., Koslouski, J. B., Chafouleas, S. M., & Marcy, H. M. (2025, August). *Goal Pursuit*. Storrs, CT: UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health. Available from: <http://csch.uconn.edu/>.

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This work was supported by the National Institutes of Health Award Number U24AT011281. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

¹ Park, C. L., Kubzansky, L. D., Chafouleas, S. M., Davison, R. J., Keltner, D., Parsafar, P., Conwell, Y., Martin, M. Y., Hanmer, J., & Wang, K. H. (2023). Emotional well-being: What it is and why it matters. *Affective Science*, 4(1), 10-20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42761-022-00163-0>.

² Gollwitzer, P. M., & Oettingen, G. (2012). Goal pursuit. In R. M. Ryan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of human motivation* (pp. 208–231). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195399820.013.0013>

³ Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “What” and “Why” of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1449618>

⁴ TED. (2018, July 2). Why the secret to success is setting the right goals [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4N1q4RNi9I>

