

How People Lose 100 Pounds

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I am in awe of people who make a decision to lose a huge amount of weight—75 pounds, 100, even more—and then do it. I'm not talking about *The Biggest Loser* contestants, who do it for money and fame. I mean those who, privately and without fanfare, commit themselves to diet and exercise, set a distant goal, and then slowly chip away—one difficult pound after another difficult pound after another. The payoff is so far away. How do they stay motivated for the long haul? How do they even get started?

Classical theories of motivation fail to explain such long-range commitment. These theories suggest that motivation increases as we approach our goals, as they come within reach—which explains how we psych ourselves up to shed pound 97, 98, 99 and 100. But how about pound 1, and pound 3, and 9? How do people get charged up to begin with, and over that first hump, when the slog is so long and exhausting?

A new theory of goal pursuit may shed light on how we deal with the early stage of a long-range commitment. Northwestern University psychological scientist Andrea Bonezzi and colleagues wondered if personal motivation might be influenced by the way we think about progress—how we value each step toward a goal. Think of it this way: If we're focused on the ultimate goal—say losing 100 pounds—then each of the last pounds—97, 98, 99—is indeed more motivating than each early pound. But what if we're focused not on the goal weight, but on our starting point? Then each of the early lost pounds has more value, and is more motivating. Is it possible that we naturally begin with a focus on the starting gate, and then switch to the finish line only later on?

That's the idea that the scientists decided to test in the lab. They ran three experiments, including this one:

The scientists recruited a group of volunteers to proofread nine essays for typos—tedious work. They all did the same work, but the scientists manipulated the way they thought about their progress. Some started off seeing nine icons, each representing one essay; as they finished each essay, one icon would disappear, from left to right. In other words, they forced these volunteers to focus on how much work was left *to go*. The others focused on work completed *so far*. They initially saw an empty row, and one icon was then added for each essay completed, left to right. A third group simply saw a line of nine washed out icons, with whatever one they were working on at the moment highlighted.

The researchers measured each volunteer's performance, in time and accuracy, and also assessed their attention—whether they were looking forward or backward. The results, [reported on-line in the journal *Psychological Science*](#), clearly supported the new theory. Those who were focused on the ultimate goal performed as classical theory would predict, increasing in accuracy and speed as they got closer to the finish line. But those who were focused on their progress from the starting line showed the opposite pattern: Their performance peaked close to the beginning, then declined. The third group was perhaps the most interesting: These volunteers were more focused—and equally focused—in the beginning and at the end. Their performance fell off in the middle, presumably because their motivation slackened.

What's more, motivation clearly dropped off when they lacked a clear reference point—either a starting line or a finish line.

In the words of Bonezzi, they were “stuck in the middle.” These findings suggest a previously undiscovered vulnerability to relapse, occurring in that no man's land halfway to a distant goal. In other words, the real obstacle to losing 100 pounds may not be pounds 1, 3 and 9—but rather pounds 48, 51 and 56.

Wray Herbert's book, [*On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*](#), is about thinking, rational and irrational. Excerpts from his two blogs—“We're Only Human” and “Full Frontal Psychology”—appear regularly in [*The Huffington Post*](#) and in [*Scientific American Mind*](#).