Goal Disengagement in Everyday Life: Longitudinal Observation of New Year's Resolutions

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Goal disengagement has been well studied in contexts where giving up is generally adaptive, and understudied in more ordinary situations. 1,201 American adults described up to five New Year's resolutions and reported on their goal pursuit after six months and one year. Explicit goal disengagement was very rare and occurred in less than 7% of goals at six months and one year. More often, people took breaks and discontinued pursuit (e.g., simply devoting no effort and commitment to the goal, not often or recently working on the goal). People did not often make a deliberate decision to quit, but for nearly one quarter of goals, people thought about it. People who scored higher in a measure of self-regulatory skill (Trait Self-Control) tended to discontinue pursuit less often. There was not evidence that when they did, they felt better about it than their less-skilled counterparts. This research documents phenomena that fall between quitting and persistence. In doing so, it highlights the value of studying goal phenomena in everyday contexts, and the need for theoretical and empirical work that clarifies the defining qualities and processes of goal disengagement and adjacent phenomena as they occur in the context of people's genuinely held goals.

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Giving up is a common occurrence, one that even the most disciplined and accomplished people experience from time to time. Sometimes, the goals that people set for themselves and pursue turn out to be impossible, at odds with other goals or important values, or excessively difficult or costly relative to their value if achieved. In such cases, *goal disengagement*, or withdrawing commitment and effort from a goal, can be an adaptive choice that frees time and energy for other, more tenable, pursuits (Brandstätter et al., 2013; Brandstätter & Bernecker, 2022; Carver & Scheier, 2005; Klinger, 1975; Staw, 1981; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003; Wrosch et al., 2013). In addition to the conscious decision to disengage from a goal, people may discontinue pursuit of the goal for a variety of reasons that stem from the natural limits on time, attention, and motivation sustained over time.

Research on goal disengagement has addressed basic questions about how and why people give up on their goals, including the factors that drive conscious decisions to disengage (e.g., Lench & Levine, 2008), and the process of disengagement as it unfolds over time (e.g., Brandstätter et al., 2013; Gagne et al., 2011). Despite producing key insights on goal disengagement, the broad relevance of this work for understanding disengagement from goals in everyday life has been limited due to its focus on a small number of central and specific goals with little consideration for the interdependence of goals across the many goals, mundane and important, that people are pursuing at a given time. As a result, relatively little is known about goal disengagement across the full range of goals people spontaneously set and pursue in everyday life.

The present research aims to characterize goal disengagement as it naturally occurs in everyday life. In two year-long longitudinal studies of Americans pursuing New Year's Resolutions, this exploratory, descriptive research addresses several basic questions about goal disengagement that follow from extant theory and empirical research. Broadly, the research addresses how and why people disengage from their goals and whether basic skill in self-regulation is associated with goal disengagement processes.

Previous Research

Goal disengagement has long been a topic of theoretical interest in the social and behavioral sciences (e.g., Klinger, 1975). Constructs and theories that directly pertain to goal disengagement processes, or describe individual differences in or related to goal disengagement processes, include escalation (e.g., Staw, 1981), the sunk cost or Concorde effect (e.g., Arkes & Ayton, 1999), flexible tenacity (e.g., Gollwitzer et al., 2008), goal disengagement capacity (e.g., Wrosch, Scheier, Carver, et al., 2003), non-productive persistence (e.g., McFarlin et al., 1984), cognitive salience or prioritization of unfinished tasks (e.g., Zeigarnik, 1927), rigidity (e.g., Wesley, 2002), perseveration (e.g., Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Sandson & Albert, 1984), tenacity (e.g., Baum & Locke, 2004), perseverance and grit (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007), and persistence (e.g., Battle, 1965; Feather, 1962; Fox & Hoffman, 2002; Ryans, 1939; Weiner, 1970). Although none of these concepts or accounts offers a comprehensive description of goal description, together they provide a useful set of foundational ideas for developing such a description.

More recent and elaborate models based on empirical research focused on meaningful goals offer coherent accounts of how people decide to disengage from goals (e.g., McGuire &

Kable, 2016) and what happens after they make disengagement decisions (e.g., Brandstätter et al., 2013; Ghassemi et al., 2017). A shortcoming of this more recent work is its focus on goals that are extreme in their simplicity or their importance relative to most everyday goals. Nevertheless, it offers a useful starting point for considering how goal disengagement works with respect to naturally occurring goals as reported on in the natural context in which they are pursued.

Decisions to Disengage from Goals

Several theoretical perspectives posit that, to make adaptive disengagement decisions, people should monitor for and respond to cues that suggest continued pursuit will not result in goal attainment or is not worth the effort (e.g., Brandstätter & Schüler, 2013; Brehm & Self, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 2005, 1990; Gilroy & Hantula, 2015; Klinger, 1975; McGuire & Kable, 2016; Ntoumanis & Sedikides, 2018; Shah & Higgins, 1997). From the perspective of goal pursuers, then, goal disengagement may happen when people have low confidence in their ability to pursue the goal (*efficacy*) or when the goal is of little *value* relative to its costs (a perspective that aligns with well-supported, general theories of motivation in goal pursuit; Carver et al., 1979; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Klinger, 1975; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Consistent with this account, people are more likely to disengage the farther they are from achieving a goal (e.g., Boehne & Paese, 2000) and when financial or other tangible incentives are removed (e.g., Halkjelsvik & Rise, 2015).

People's approach to disengagement, or how difficult they find making disengagement decisions, can also be influenced by other factors. For example, such decisions and their difficulty vary as a function of features of the goal context (e.g., whether achievement is more or

less likely as time passes; McGuire & Kable, 2012), the goal itself (e.g., whether the goal is

characterized by approaching or avoiding an objective; Lench & Levine, 2008), people's pursuit

strategies (e.g., implementation intentions, Henderson et al., 2007), people's reasons for

engaging in goal pursuit (e.g., Ntoumanis, Healy, Sedikides, Duda, et al., 2014; Ntoumanis,

Healy, Sedikides, Smith, et al., 2014), people's traits (e.g., self-esteem, McFarlin, Baumeister, &

Blascovich, 1984), and people's dispositional preferences with respect to goal pursuit (e.g.,

Molden & Hui, 2011). Collectively, these factors account for the wide variability in goal

disengagement and the relative difficulty or ease with which it is enacted.

Much of what we know about how people decide to disengage from goals comes from

research on goals that are relatively simple--specifically, goals that can be reached in a single,

continuous effort. These goals are commonly used because their simplicity allows researchers to

accurately measure, control, and manipulate theoretical causes of disengagement. In particular,

with simple goals, researchers can manipulate whether a goal is objectively attainable or other

factors that make disengagement the most rational, attractive course of action. For example,

research on goal disengagement decisions has been conducted in the context of completing

puzzles (McFarlin, Baumeister, Blascovich, 1984) and meeting a distance goal on an indoor

exercise bike (Ntoumanis et al., 2013). Although simple goals allow for the use of rigorous and

controlled methods, they fail to represent important features of everyday goal pursuit that are

theoretically relevant to goal disengagement decisions. Specifically, three important features of

everyday goal pursuit render extant research on goal disengagement decisions of questionable

relevance for understanding goal pursuit in everyday contexts.

First, in everyday goal pursuit, disengagement decisions are made within--and often because of --a broader self-regulatory context. In daily life, people evaluate goal disengagement decisions not just from the perspective of the focal goal pursuit (e.g., how likely they think attainment is), but also considering the other goals that they pursue, their values, and the opportunities they could pursue if they disengage from the goal (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Because of the interdependence between goals and the finite nature of time, attention and motivation, disengagement decisions in everyday contexts are likely to be more complex and difficult to predict than in the context of singular, simple goals.

Second, in everyday goal pursuit, disengagement cannot always be characterized as adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive goal disengagement is commonly operationalized as disengaging from unattainable goals and persisting in pursuit of attainable goals. However, except in rare circumstances, neither pursuers nor observers can know whether the goals they are pursuing are truly unattainable. Even in retrospect and with subjective judgment, disengagement decisions resist simple characterization; someone may initially regret disengaging from a goal, but, years later, recognize that doing so led them to make a positive change. Thus, theoretical accounts of the traits and circumstances that lead to adaptive goal disengagement decisions cannot be clearly applied to deliberations about whether to continue or stop pursuit of goals in everyday life.

Third, many everyday goals are episodic (i.e., pursued in distinct episodes of effort over time), and in episodic goals, decisions about pursuit include more than just disengagement or persistence (Moshontz & Hoyle, 2021). In goals that are pursued in a continuous episode, people can either disengage or persist, and any cessation or withdrawal of effort from goal pursuit

represents disengagement. In the episodic goal pursuits that characterize daily life, the effort people dedicate to achieving or maintaining a goal waxes and wanes in accordance with constraints, affordances, motivation, whims, and many other factors. Consequently, people can stop pursuing an episodic goal without disengaging from the goal. In episodic goal pursuits, people's status with respect to a goal can fall somewhere between disengagement and persistence. For example, they can withdraw effort and perhaps even commitment without having deliberately decided to disengage. In everyday contexts, goal pursuit can involve states that are functionally similar to, but not the same as, goal disengagement. "Frozen goals," in which people have stopped pursuing a goal but still report being committed to it, are an example (Davydenko et al., 2019).

In sum, what we know about how people decide to disengage from goals is based on relatively simple goal contexts and may not extend to the more complex, episodic goals that people pursue in daily life (Moshontz & Hoyle, 2021). In everyday goals, relative to simple goal contexts, goal disengagement decisions are made in the context of other goals and values, cannot be easily categorized as adaptive or maladaptive, and may be harder to distinguish from other goal phenomena (e.g., goal failure, unrelated goal neglect) using existing definitions of goal disengagement.

Goal Disengagement Processes

As with decisions about whether to disengage from a goal, research inspired by theoretical accounts of how disengagement unfolds has only begun to address the complexity of goal disengagement in everyday life (e.g., Ghassemi et al., 2017; Herrmann & Brandstätter, 2015). Goal disengagement in research is understood as a linear process. When people confront

challenges in their pursuit, like repeated failures, they experience an *action crisis*, or a stage of

goal pursuit in which they deliberate giving up (Brandstätter et al., 2013). Once people decide to

disengage from a goal, the process is incremental. People must cope with and adapt to a new

reality without the goal. Many people struggle to let go of goals and continue to think about the

goal despite having disengaged from it (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). Although this

deliberate process and its sequelae likely characterize disengagement some of the time, it does

not allow for the possibility that people may discontinue pursuit of goals without experiencing a

crisis or engaging in conscious deliberation.

Characteristic of research on the process of disengaging from goals--and in contrast to the

work on disengagement decisions--is a focus on highly valued, important goals that are central to

peoples' identity. For example, influential research on goal disengagement has been conducted in

the context of job or athletic career retirement (e.g., Gagne et al., 2011; Holding et al., 2020),

infertility (Kraaij et al., 2010), and illness (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, et al., 2003). In pursuit of

these challenging goals, it makes sense that people think deliberately about disengagement, and

that the process of disengagement can affect their interpersonal relationships and other important

aspects of their lives. Less clear is that deliberation about whether to continue pursuing a goal

and the process of disengagement unfold similarly for more mundane but typical goals.

Many goals that people pursue in everyday life are not highly personally valued or

relevant to identity. Thus, a comprehensive account of goal disengagement must describe what

disengagement looks like for goals that are relatively low in importance, which may be far more

typical than goals that are high in importance. Goal importance and related phenomena (e.g.,

motivation, identity-relevance) are central to theories of goal pursuit and persistence (Moshontz

& Hoyle, 2021), and likely affect goal disengagement processes, too. For goals that are of moderate importance (e.g., hand in an assignment on time) or even goals that are trivial (e.g., beat a prior high score in an online game), the process of goal pursuit that ends with disengagement may be less linear, and less disruptive to people's lives. Theoretical accounts of how people disengage from goals after they have decided to do so may not accurately characterize goal disengagement processes in everyday goals, which range in their importance.

Goal Disengagement as a Self-Regulatory Skill

Goal disengagement is commonly understood to be a component of self-regulatory skill (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). Most prior research has focused on individual differences in how skilled people are at disengaging from their goals once they have decided to. This research is grounded in Goal Adjustment theory, and typically relies on a measure of how easy people find disengagement (working on and thinking about a goal) in various situations where disengagement is adaptive (Wrosch et al., 2011). Little is known about how measures of basic self-regulatory skill relate to aspects of goal disengagement decisions and processes, and whether any associations of self-regulatory skill remain when accounting for how easy people find goal disengagement. Of particular interest is whether self-regulatory skill, including ease of disengagement, is related to the discontinuation of pursuit that does not follow a deliberate decision and disengagement process.

Goal Pursuit in Everyday Life

Goals are cognitive representations of desired (or undesired) future states (Elliot & Fryer, 2008). The goal construct encompasses many kinds of cognitive representations that may be vague or specific, abstract or concrete, and that span the full range of intention, difficulty, time

scale, deliberateness, and complexity (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Numerous theoretical models and hierarchies describe the structure and content of the goals that people spontaneously set and pursue in everyday life (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Kruglanski et al., 2002; McAdams, 1996). Typically, models organize goals in a hierarchy. Abstract values and motives guide big-picture life goals (Roberts et al., 2004). Major life goals guide more specific, mid-level goals often called personal strivings or personal projects (Emmons, 1986; Little et al., 1992). Personal strivings or projects then guide concrete action goals that pertain to the immediate future.

New Year's resolutions likely fall into every level of the goal hierarchy, with most fitting the mid-level goal category of personal strivings or personal projects in that they are designed to be achieved within a year. Previous research on people's mid-level goals in different contexts and using different goal terminology uncovers a relatively consistent pattern of themes. When asked to describe personal strivings, wishes, personal projects, New Year's resolutions, and personal goals, people provide broadly similar responses that typically fall into the same major domains of relationships, career or education, finances, community, health, and religion or spirituality (King & Broyles, 1997; Reisz et al., 2013; Salmela-Aro et al., 2012; Woolley & Fishbach, 2016).

Prior research on goals has been conducted in the context of New Year's resolutions, but resolutions may not perfectly represent everyday goals. Methodological approaches in previous research limit our ability to assess whether resolutions tend to be mid-level goals (e.g., personal strivings). Mid-level goals, and in particular personal strivings, are typically solicited with open-ended text which is then characterized into nomothetic categories (McAuliffe et al., 2020; Veilleux et al., 2018). In prior research on New Year's resolutions, people's goals are typically measured by self-report into nomothetic categories rather than open-ended text (e.g., Woolley &

Fishbach, 2016). So, although New Year's resolutions are broadly similar in content to other mid-level goals (i.e., at the level of domain), whether and how New Year's resolutions differ from other mid-level goals is not clear.

Resolutions may be the same as the goals that people routinely set and pursue in everyday life. People may choose for resolutions the goals they had intended to pursue anyways, inspired either by social tradition or because of the new year itself (Hennecke & Converse, 2017). However, New Year's resolutions may have unique characteristics. For example, their timing alone might shape their content. For example, even though health goals are generally prevalent among everyday goals (e.g., in a sample of 557 American Mturk workers, 66% had health goals; Milyavskaya & Nadolny, 2018), New Year's resolutions may be more likely to relate to health goals than goals set at other times of the year. Many people celebrate cultural and religious holidays at the end of the year that for many involve indulgent eating and travel, which may bring lapses in dietary and exercise routines.

The Present Research

Understanding goal disengagement decisions and processes across the range of goals that people pursue in daily life and the variety of contexts in which they pursue them is a critical step to identifying the multiple ways people may disengage from pursuit. To that end, the present research aims to characterize goal disengagement as it occurs in everyday life. We use data from two year-long longitudinal studies of people's New Year's resolutions to characterize disengagement phenomena, using measures of a variety of constructs relevant to disengagement and adjacent goal outcomes that may occur in everyday life (e.g., goal status with respect to effort and commitment, amount of current effort, recency of the last episode of pursuit,

frequency of pursuit episodes, extent of lapses in pursuit, goal modification, characterization of goal outcomes) to better understand what happens to the goals people set and pursue, and where theoretical conceptualizations of disengagement lack correspondence with goal outcomes in daily life. Then, we characterize the frequency of disengagement and other goal outcomes and people's experience of disengagement (e.g., how deliberate, autonomous, and controlled disengagement is, how much people think about quitting) in order to understand what everyday goal disengagement looks like. Finally, we evaluate associations between a trait measure of self-regulatory skill and disengagement, disengagement decisions, and disengagement processes.

Method

Data were collected in two longitudinal survey studies conducted in 2016 and 2018 that aimed to characterize everyday goals and pursuit processes (Author, 2020). The present analyses use a combined sample. This combined sample includes data from the three time points at which surveys were administered in both years: the beginning of the year in January, mid-year in July, and after the end of the year in the following January. There were no experimental manipulations. All measures administered are available at https://osf.io/t7bjc/?view_only=7aa2c09348b340358c70eef0fe04a117.

Participants

Participants were 1201 American adults recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in one of two studies (in 2016, $n = 415$; in 2018, $n = 786$). Participants provided information about 2590 goals (mode = 2; mean = 2.16). Observations were excluded from the analysis sample if the participant reported answering questions randomly on any survey (N participants = 23; but this question was included in the 2018 survey only).

In the analysis sample, participants' average age was 36.71 (range 18 to 76). There were more female participants than male participants (n female = 676; n male = 522; n identified as neither male nor female = 3). The analysis sample's non-exclusive race and ethnicity composition was as follows: Black or African American (n = 92); Asian (n = 70); Hispanic (n = 82); White (n = 1000); American Indian and Alaska Native (n = 13); Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander (n = 4); Other (n = 26). In the sample, there were 21 unique combinations of these identity categories.

Procedures

In mid-January of 2016 and 2018, participants were invited to complete a survey. Recruitment materials specified that people must have set New Year's Resolutions to be a participant, and whether people had resolutions was a question asked on a screening survey. Participants provided informed consent and then completed the first survey. People who completed the first survey were invited to complete additional surveys in July and the following January. In the 2016 survey, participants were also invited to complete a survey in April, but the April data are not included in the present analyses.

The surveys took most people between 10 and 15 minutes to complete (average time ranged from 9.7 to 19.7 minutes). They were paid between $1 and $3 per survey and were awarded bonus payments of up to $3 dollars for completing more surveys. To incentivize completion of all surveys, people were compensated more for surveys administered later in the year.

The first survey asked participants to report information about their individual difference traits relevant to self-regulatory skill, information about up to five goals, and their demographics.

The July survey asked participants about the status of their goal and information about their pursuit. Participants who indicated that they were no longer pursuing their goal and had no plans to in the future were asked to characterize and describe how and why they disengaged from their goal. The final survey asked participants to report the status of their goal and characterize their objective and subjective success.

Measures

Measures used in the present analyses are described here. Measure administration information (month and survey year), means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, number of goals, and the number of participants are presented in Table 1. Correlations among measures of disengagement phenomena are presented in Table 2.

Goal Status

In July and at the end of the year, participants were asked to categorize the status of their goal. The status categories described the current status of the goal, and sometimes the future status of the goal and an informal descriptor (e.g., "I have put this resolution on hold; I am not currently working on this resolution, but I plan to.").

Disengagement. Explicit disengagement is operationalized as a status characterized by not pursuing the goal and not planning to in the future (and not having achieved it). The response options corresponding to explicit disengagement were: "I have thrown in the towel; I am no longer working on this resolution and I do not plan to in the future." and "I have not started working on this resolution, and I do not plan to in the future." in the 2016 survey, and "I have quit; I am not working on this resolution and I do not plan to in the future." in the 2018 survey.

Paused Pursuit. Paused pursuit is operationalized as a status characterized by not pursuing the goal and planning to in the future. The response option corresponding to paused pursuit in both surveys is: "I have put this resolution on hold; I am not currently working on this resolution, but I plan to."

Lack of Effort and Commitment

Goal disengagement is typically defined as the withdrawal of effort and commitment from a goal. In July, participants reported their current level of effort by answering the question "Currently, how much effort are you putting towards this resolution?" on a Likert scale from 1 (*None*) to 5 (*A lot*). In July, participants reported their current level of commitment by answering the question "Currently, how committed are you to this resolution?" on a Likert scale from 1 (*None*) to 5 (*A lot*). People who we describe as lacking effort and commitment selected 1 for both.

Pursuit Frequency and Recency

In everyday contexts, disengagement can be identified by a discontinuation of engagement in goal pursuit. In July in the 2016 survey, participants provided information about pursuit frequency and recency. Participants first described the behaviors that they did when working on their goal. They were then asked, "Over the last three months, how often have you performed these behaviors?" and responded on a Likert scale from 1 (*Never or almost never*) to 5 (*Everyday*). They were also asked "When was the last time that you worked on or made progress on this resolution?" Response options were: "today", "yesterday", "before yesterday but less than a week ago", "more than one week but less than two weeks ago", "more than two weeks but less

than three weeks ago", "more than three weeks but less than a month ago", "more than a month

ago", and "never".

Disengagement Decision

Disengagement and related phenomena may be characterized by a reduction in

commitment, specifically. This might result in people describing a goal as active but feeling

unattached to it. At the end of the year in the 2018 survey, all participants were asked whether

they had made a deliberate decision to let go of their goal ("Did you make a deliberate decision

to let this resolution go?").

Quitting Ideation

Previous research has identified that thinking about quitting marks an important stage,

termed an "action crisis," in the goal disengagement process (Brandstätter et al., 2013).

Operationalizations of action crises differ. To clearly represent our operationalization, we use a

more descriptive term. At the end of the year in the 2016 survey, Quitting Ideation was measured

with a single item. Participants indicated the extent to which the statement "I thought about

quitting this resolution" was true of them on a scale from 1 (*Not at all true*) to 5 (*Completely*

true). In binary characterizations, responses of 4 or 5 were categorized as having thought of

quitting.

Trait Self-Control

Trait Self-Control was measured with the Capacity for Self-Control Scale, a 20-item

measure that differs from other measures of Trait Self-Control in that it includes subscales for

three varieties of self-control: inhibition, initiation, and continuation (Hoyle & Davisson, 2018;

Powers, Moshontz, & Hoyle, 2019). In this scale, people indicate how often their behavior

reflects tendencies relating to each of these varieties of self-control on a Likert-scale from 1 (*hardly ever*) to 5 (*nearly always*). The scale had excellent reliability as estimated by Cronbach's alpha (α =.933) and McDonald's total omega (w = .947).

In analyses, we use this measure of Trait Self-Control as a proxy for people's self-regulatory skill. In this sample, Trait Self-Control was highly positively correlated with other measures of and related to self-regulatory skill: BFI-44 Conscientiousness (α =.898, w = .922, r = .796; BFI-44, John & Srivastava, 1999); Grit (α =.893, w = .930, r = .784; Duckworth et al., 2007); and Impulsivity (α =.819, w = .877, r = .606; ZKPQ, Joireman & Kuhlman, 2004; Zuckerman, 2008). The scale was negatively related to the disengagement capacity subscale of the Goal Adjustment Scale (α = 0.930, w = 0.947, r = -.340; Wrosch et al., 2013).

Subjective Success

Subjective Success in goal pursuit was measured at the end of the year with one item. Participants reported the extent to which they felt successful in a subjective sense, considering constraints and modifications they made to their goal on a Likert-scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Completely*).

Analysis Approach

Analyses in this manuscript are exploratory, meaning that they were not specified prior to data collection. Previous analyses have been done on these data, focused on predicting goal outcomes. Given the number of variables and potential analyses of this large dataset, and the increase in false error rates associated with analytic flexibility and large numbers of tests, we restrict inferential analyses to a relatively small set of theoretically important variables.

Correlations use pairwise complete observations using first resolutions only. Clustered data presents a challenge for characterizing covariation between pairs of variables. Pearson *r* does not account for clustering, so calculating correlations with clustered data can produce inaccurate estimates of correlations and their standard errors. To avoid deflated standard errors while optimizing interpretability of results, we compute correlations using Pearson *r* among the first resolution that people set. In supplemental analyses, we report the means, standard deviations, and Pearson *r* correlations in the entire dataset.

In any multilevel models estimated, we use group-mean centering for Level 1 (goal) predictors and include group means as Level 2 (person) predictors. All Level 1 predictors are group mean centered. Models include group means. All Level 2 predictors, including group means, are grand mean centered. With this centering approach, intercepts are the estimated value of the dependent variable for an average person's average goal. Effect parameters of group mean centered predictors are the estimated within-person effect of the predictor (i.e., the effect of variation among the goals a person holds). Effect parameters of (grand mean centered) group means are the estimated between-person effect of the predictor (i.e., the effect of variation in people's average values). However, our ability to accurately parse within-group and between-group effects of predictors is limited by the fact that some people had only one goal, thus confounding between and within-person effects.

All calculations and analyses reported in this manuscript were conducted in R. Inferential tests were conducted using a frequentist approach. Multilevel models were estimated with the R package lme4 (Bates et al., 2015) and summarized using sjPlot (Lüdecke, 2018)

Missing Data

Despite efforts to reduce attrition, (e.g., via compensation, generous survey completion windows, and reminders), there was substantial attrition throughout the year resulting in missing data and limits on our ability to draw accurate conclusions. In the analysis sample, all participants completed the first wave of data collection and about 59% ($n = 704$) completed the final survey. About 70% ($n = 844$) completed at least one follow-up survey. The most common pattern of survey completion was completing all waves ($n = 558$), followed by completing only the first survey (n = 357). Every possible pattern of survey completion was represented in the data.

The number of surveys completed was positively associated with individual difference measures of and closely related to self-regulatory skills that we measured: Trait Self-Control ($r = 0.137$, $t(1200) = 4.783$, $p = <.001$); Conscientiousness ($r = 0.164$, $t(1178) = 5.696$, $p = <.001$); Grit ($r = 0.18$, $t(414) = 3.716$, $p = 0.003$); Impulsivity ($r = 0.17$, $t(414) = 3.503$, $p = 0.005$). One exception was goal disengagement capacity ($r = 0.011$, $t(414) = 0.232$, $p = 1$). Age was correlated with the number of surveys completed ($r = 0.214$, $t(1190) = 7.539$, $p = <.001$), as was educational attainment, modestly ($r = 0.084$, $t(1200) = 2.92$, $p = 0.023$). This is unsurprising as age and educational attainment are associated with skill in self-regulation.

Missingness is handled with listwise deletion combined with maximum likelihood estimation for inferential tests (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Analyses should be interpreted within the context of this missing data, and our approach to handling it. Most missingness in the analyzed data is due to attrition and not the more troubling reason of omission of specific answers. It is unlikely that we are missing information about resolution outcomes at the end of the year because participants wanted to avoid reporting that they had disengaged from their goals

because when data are missing, they are generally missing for all the goals that a participant

held. The missingness in our sample primarily threatens inferences about between-subjects

effects.

Results

Characterizing Resolutions

In this sample, resolutions spanned a broad range of goals. Resolutions included such

varied goals as: "Find a better job", "Stop eating meat", "Practice photography", "Try to save

money", "Get out of debt, or at least reduce it by 50%","Watch every Meryl Streep movie",

"Finishing all the video games I've bought or will buy this year", and "Be happy."

People indicated the life domains their resolution related to and could select multiple

domains. Their responses speak to the direct relevance of people's personal goals to important

aspects of their well-being, and especially to their physical health. About 9.3% of cases are

missing domain information because in 2016, this question was not asked in the first survey.

Across non-exclusive domains, the most indicated were physical health ($n = 1285$; 54.68%) and

mental health ($n = 1069$; 45.49%), and the least education ($n = 162$; 6.89%) and society ($n = 145$;

6.17%). The most common domain profile was physical health as the only selected domain ($n =$

522; 22.21%), followed by physical health and mental health ($n = 298$; 12.68%). The third most

common domain profile was money as the only selected domain ($n = 197$; 8.38). Among the 51

resolutions that fell into "other" domain categories, the word stems that appeared more than once

across the open-ended domain descriptions were: hobby, health, person, home, creative, develop,

enjoy, environment, life, love, maintain, relationship, and time.

The words in people's resolutions align with this dominance of health and finance domains. The most common word in resolutions was "lose", followed by "weight", "eat" and "exercise". The six most common bigrams were: "lose weight", "lose [number]", "[number] pounds", "eat healthier", "quit smoking", and "save money". The most common numbers specified in resolutions that contained the words "pound*" or "lb*" were 30 ($n = 28$), 20 ($n = 27$), and 10 pounds ($n = 22$). About 7% ($n = 174$) of resolutions contained words related to substance use (i.e., "tobacco", "cigar*", "addict*", "smok*", "alcohol", "drink", "drunk", and not "soda").

Characterizing Disengagement

Disengagement was an uncommon outcome for New Year's resolutions mid-year and at the end of the year, across different conceptualizations and operationalizations (see Table 1, Figure 1 and Figure 2). Explicit disengagement was among the rarest. In total, 6.6% of goals were explicitly disengaged from. In July and at the end of the year, 5% of goals were disengaged from. Disengagement is commonly defined as the withdrawal of effort and commitment from a goal. For 7.1% of goals, people reported that their effort and commitment levels were "none."

Discontinuation of goals was slightly more common. For 15.3% of resolutions, people reported that they had paused pursuit in either July or at the end of the year. Pursuit frequency and recency also capture discontinuation of pursuit. For 9.6% of goals, people reported that they had "never or almost never" worked on their goal in the previous three months. For 20.2% of goals, people reported that they had not worked on their goal for more than a month.

These varieties of goal disengagement and discontinuation are distinct (see Table 3). This is clear when evaluating the proportion of goals that were explicitly disengaged from among

those that were discontinued as captured by the alternative characterizations of disengagement.

The most similar conceptualizations were those that captured a lack of effort and commitment,

and that captured frequency and recency of pursuit. Fewer than half (41.6%) of goals that people

were devoting no effort to and had no commitment to were described as explicitly disengaged

from. Just one fifth (20.3%) of goals that people had not worked on in the previous three months,

were explicitly disengaged from. A similar proportion (18.3%) of goals that people had last

worked on over a month ago, were explicitly disengaged from. However, among goals that

people paused pursuit of, just 7.3% were later or previously disengaged from the goal.
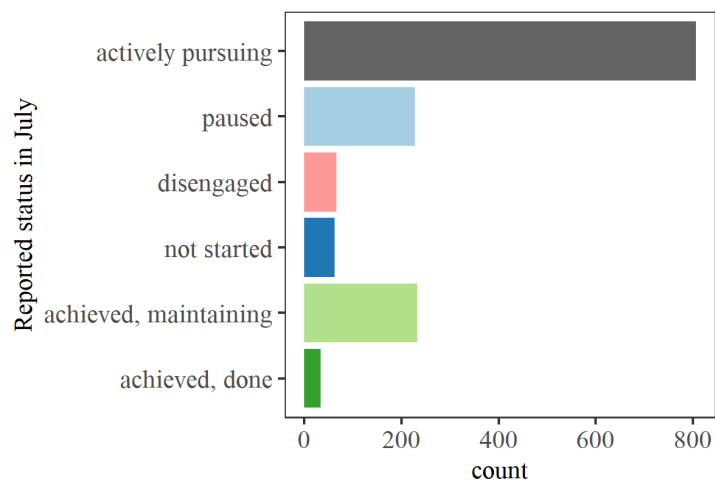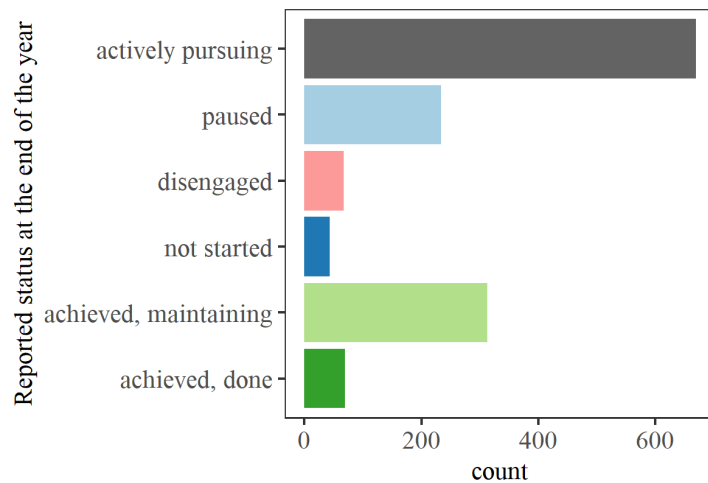
Figure 1

Resolution Status in July

Figure 2

Resolution Status at the End of the Year

Characterizing Disengagement Decisions

At the end of the year in 2018, among all goals, people reported that for 10% of goals, people had deliberately decided to "let go." Of those, just 25% had previously been described as explicitly disengaged from (i.e., goal was not being pursued and would not be in the future).

At the end of the year in 2016, among all goals, for 5.8% of resolutions, people agreed or strongly agreed that they had thought about quitting. Among the goals that people thought about quitting, 23.3% were explicitly disengaged from.

In 2018, anyone who reported that they were not currently working on their resolution (i.e., they had disengaged, paused, or deferred the goal) were asked to provide an open-ended explanation about their reason for not working on the goal. ("In as much detail as possible, tell us why you aren't currently working on this resolution."). The five most common words in people's descriptions were: time ($n = 73$; 39.7% of resolutions that had been discontinued), feel ($n = 28$; 15.2%), eat ($n = 24$; 13%), life ($n = 19$; 10.3%), and money ($n = 19$; 10.3%).

Disengagement as a Self-Regulatory Skill

Trait Self-Control and discontinuation occurrence. Multilevel generalized linear models estimated the association between Trait Self-Control and disengagement from or discontinuation of pursuit. There was not evidence that Trait Self-Control was associated with Disengagement and Lack of Effort and Commitment (see Table 3). Consistent with the idea that Trait Self-Control captures meaningful variance in people's tendency or capacity to regulate their behavior in service of their goals, Trait Self-Control was negatively associated with forms of discontinuation (see Table 4). Higher scores in Trait Self-Control were associated with lower odds of pausing pursuit and had pursued their goals more frequently and recently mid-year.

Disengagement and discontinuation decisions. Multilevel generalized linear models estimated the association between people's Trait Self-Control and the extent to which they made a decision to disengage or discontinue pursuit. There was no evidence that Trait Self-Control was associated with having made a deliberate decision to discontinue pursuit or with having thought more about whether to discontinue pursuit (see Table 5).

Table 1

Measure administration timing, means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, N obs

Variable	Administration Timing		M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	N obs
Disengagement	July and End		0.07	0.25	3.50	10.24	1686
Lack of Effort & Commitment	July		0.07	0.26	3.34	9.19	1427
Paused Pursuit	July and End		0.24	0.42	1.24	-0.45	1686
Pursuit Frequency	July	2016 only	3.34	1.16	-0.42	-0.53	612
Pursuit Recency	July	2016 only	3.72	2.41	0.44	-1.31	650
Disengagement Decision	End	2018 only	0.10	0.30	2.66	5.07	759
Quitting Ideation	End	2016 only	2.23	1.46	0.78	-0.88	636
Trait Self-Control	January		3.53	0.74	-0.09	-0.37	1201

Note. *M* and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. *N* obs reflects the number of observations used to calculate the means, representing all available unique observations.

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, Ns and correlations with pairwise complete N, among first resolutions

Variable	M	SD	N obs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Disengaged	0.05	0.22	843							
2. Lack of Effort and Commitment	0.03	0.18	697	.45** [697]						
3. Paused Pursuit	0.23	0.42	843	.04 [843]	.00 [697]					
4. Pursuit Frequency	3.46	1.06	240	.02 [240]	.01 [240]	-.47** [240]				
5. Pursuit Recency	3.53	2.37	253	.18** [253]	.25** [253]	.47** [253]	-.53** [240]			
6. Disengagement Decision	0.08	0.27	453	.29** [453]	.14* [343]	.22** [453]				
7. Quitting Ideation	2.29	1.48	250	.21** [250]	.12 [214]	.25** [250]	-.16* [204]	.15* [214]		
8. Trait Self-Control	3.53	0.74	1201	-.03 [843]	.02 [697]	-.08* [843]	.15* [240]	-.13* [253]	.02 [453]	-.25** [250]

Note. M and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. Values in brackets indicate pairwise complete observation *N*. Correlations cannot be calculated between measures only administered in 2016 (Pursuit Frequency, Recency) and those only

administered in 2018 (Disengagement Decision). * indicates $p < .05$. ** indicates $p < .01$.

Table 3

Regressing Trait Self-Control on Disengagement and Lack of Effort and Commitment

Predictors	Disengagement		Lack of Effort and Commitment	
	OR	CI	OR	CI
(Intercept)	.002***	.0001-.025	.07**	0.01-0.36
Trait Self-Control	.66	.33- 1.33	.76	.53-1.09
Random Effects				
σ^2	3.29		3.29	
τ_{00}	52.46		2.96	
ICC	0.94		0.47	
N_{people}	843		697	
$N_{resolutions}$	1686		1427	
Marginal R^2 / Cond R^2	0.002 / 0.941		0.007/0.477	

Note. Disengagement reflects goal status in July or at the end
of the year. OR represents odds ratio. CI represents the confidence interval.
σ^2 represents residual variance. τ_{00} represents random intercept variance.
Cond R^2 represents conditional R^2.
*p <0.05 ** p <0.01 ***p <0.001

Table 4

Regressing Trait Self-Control on Paused Pursuit, Frequent Pursuit, and Recent Pursuit

Predictors	Paused Pursuit		Frequent Pursuit		Recent Pursuit	
	OR	CI	Estimate	CI	Estimate	CI
(Intercept)	.82	.47-1.45	2.49***	1.98-2.99	5.11***	4.12-6.10
Trait Self-Control	.75***	.64-.88	.24***	.10-.38	-.39**	-.66- -.12
Random Effects						
σ^2	3.29		1.11		4.91	
τ_{00}	0.17		0.22		0.85	
ICC	0.05		0.17		0.15	
N_{people}	843		251		253	
$N_{resolutions}$	1686		612		650	
Marginal R^2 / Cond R^2	0.014/0.062		0.025/0.187		0.016/0.161	

Note. Paused Pursuit reflect goal status in July or at the end of the year.
OR represents odds ratio. CI represents confidence interval. σ^2 represents residual variance.
τ_{00} represents random intercept variance. Cond R^2 represents conditional R^2.
*p <0.05 ** p <0.01 ***p <0.001

Table 5

Regressing Trait Self-Control on Disengagement Decision and Quitting Ideation

Predictors	Disengagement Decision		Quitting Ideation	
	OR	CI	Estimate	CI
(Intercept)	.0005***	.0001-.0196	3.99***	3.39-4.58
Trait Self-Control	.967	.383-2.440	-0.49***	-.65 - -.33
Random Effects				
σ^2	3.29		1.65	
τ_{00}	67.59		0.37	
ICC	.95		0.18	
N_{people}	453		250	
$N_{resolutions}$	759		636	
Marginal R^2 / Cond R^2	.000/.954		0.070/0.240	

Note. OR represents odds ratio. CI represents confidence interval. σ^2 represents residual variance. τ_{00} represents random intercept variance. Cond R^2 represents conditional R^2.
*p <0.05 ** p <0.01 ***p <0.001

More adaptive disengagement. Multilevel generalized linear models estimated the interaction between Trait Self-Control and disengagement on people's subjective success at the end of the year using Disengagement and Lack of Effort and Commitment. Participants were specifically asked to rate their success considering challenges they faced and modifications they made. Disengagement and Lack of Effort and Commitment were negatively associated with feeling successful both within and between people. Among the goals that people held, they felt they were relatively less successful in the goal pursuits they disengaged from or withdrew effort and commitment from than those that they did not. People who disengaged from their goals and withdrew effort and commitment more than others tended to feel less successful in their goal pursuit. In addition, people with higher Trait Self-Control tended to feel more successful.

However, there was no evidence that the effects of Disengagement or Lack of Effort and

Commitment on Subjective Success differed as a function of Trait Self-Control.

Table 6

Regressing Trait Self-Control and Disengagement on Subjective Success

	Subjective Success	
Predictors	*Estimate*	*CI*
(Intercept)	2.34***	1.99-2.69
Disengagement (goals)	-.99***	-1.37- -.61
Disengagement (people)	-.11***	-2.15-1.93
Trait Self-Control	.17***	.07 - .26
Trait Self-Control*Disengagement	-.39	-.96 - .19
Random Effects		
σ^2	1.56	
τ_{00}	0.14	
ICC	0.08	
N_{people}	703	
$N_{resolutions}$	1391	
Marginal R^2 / Cond R^2	0.068 / 0.145	

Note. The interaction parameter involved the group mean of Disengagement. OR represents odds ratio. CI represents confidence interval. σ^2 represents residual variance. τ_{00} represents random intercept variance. Cond R^2 represents conditional R^2. *p <0.05 ** p <0.01 ***p <0.001

Table 7

Regressing Trait Self-Control and Lack of Effort and Commitment on Subjective Success

	Subjective Success	
Predictors	*Estimate*	*CI*
(Intercept)	2.16***	1.76 – 2.56
Lack of Effort & Commitment (goals)	-.75***	-1.13 - -.36
Lack of Effort & Commitment (people)	-2.85**	-4.98 - -.73
Trait Self-Control	.22***	.12- .33
Trait Self-Control*Lack of Effort & Commitment	.44	-.15 - 1.02
Random Effects		
σ^2	1.59	
τ_{00}	0.15	
ICC	0.09	
N_{people}	557	
$N_{resolutions}$	1135	

Marginal R^2 / Cond R^2	0.059 / 0.139

Note. The interaction parameter involved the group mean of Lack of Effort & Commitment. OR represents odds ratio. CI represents confidence interval. σ^2 represents residual variance. τ_{00} represents random intercept variance. Cond R^2 represents conditional R^2. *p <0.05 ** p <0.01 ***p <0.001

Discussion

Characterizing goal disengagement in everyday contexts, in which constraints, affordances, and other goals can influence it, allows for an enriched understanding of how and why people give up. Using a longitudinal dataset of experiences with New Year's Resolutions, we demonstrate that, in everyday pursuit, goal disengagement looks different than it does with reference to the simplified or highly important goals typical of the extant research that informs theoretical accounts of the course of goal disengagement.

Extant theory and empirical work depict goal disengagement as a deliberate process, one in which people's decisions to disengage are guided by the expectancy that continued pursuit will result in attainment and the value of attainment, and where the process of disengagement is linear, such that people incrementally let go of goals and adapt their lives to a new, goalless reality. Many people struggle to let go of goals and continue to think about them despite having disengaged from pursuit.

However, in everyday contexts, decisions to disengage from goals may not be deliberate, and goal disengagement phenomena are unstable and may even be unnoticed, requiring no major coping or life adjustment. Participants discontinued pursuit far more often than they explicitly disengaged from their goals. People did not often make a deliberate decision to stop pursuit. Many did, however, think about it. People who scored higher in a measure of self-regulatory skill tended to discontinue pursuit less often. There was no evidence of an interaction between

disengagement and self-regulatory skill on how subjectively successful people felt, considering the challenges they faced and adjustments they made.

Our research identified discontinuation phenomena that do not cleanly fit typical conceptualizations of goal disengagement. Identifying goal disengagement as distinct from adjacent goal states in which pursuit has stopped will require a collective refinement and specification of the construct's definition. The findings in this research suggest that important aspects of goal disengagement or adjacent phenomena worth exploring more in both theory and empirical work are: the extent to which discontinuing pursuit is intentional, the extent to which the pursuer is aware of having discontinued pursuit, whether the discontinuation is temporary, whether the pursuer ever engaged in pursuit of the goal, and the extent to which the discontinuation reflects the focal goal pursuit or broader self-regulatory considerations.

Although goals are varied, people systematically differ in how they approach goal pursuit and how skillfully they manage their behavior in service of their goals (i.e., in their self-regulatory skill; Brown, 1998; Carver & Scheier, 1982; Fishbach & Zhang, 2009; Karoly, 1993; Kruglanski et al., 2000). In this research we investigated how skill in self-regulation relates to disengagement and disengagement decisions, and we explored the potential for an interaction such that people skilled in self-regulation disengage more skillfully. However, given how rarely people disengaged from their goals, and that we tested just one potential outcome that might reflect skillful disengagement, this result is inconclusive. A fruitful direction for future research is characterizing individual differences in the incidence and process of everyday goal disengagement decisions. Further, there is a paradox in theoretical understandings of goal disengagement as a self-regulatory skill that has yet to be reconciled: People skilled in

self-regulation tend to be highly persistent (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2007). Future empirical

research should seek to understand whether and how people skilled in self-regulation differ from

their less-skilled counterparts in their approach to goal disengagement decisions (and related

phenomena).

The present research highlights gaps in theoretical accounts of goal disengagement, but

its methods are limited in ways that warrant caution around broad generalizations about the

nature of goal disengagement or individual differences related to it. Three limitations are critical

to highlight. First, we could only observe disengagement in a subset of our sample. Although it is

unlikely that people omitted information about disengagement within their goals, it is likely that

the people who followed through with the longitudinal surveys were different from people who

only completed the first survey. Our estimates of rates of goal disengagement, and our

observations about goal disengagement (particularly at the level of the individual) are qualified

by attrition.

Second, this research is limited by its reliance on a geographically and culturally

homogenous sample; all participants came from the United States. Most participants in this

sample have their basic needs met and set goals that may not have been of critical importance or

value. Thus, our findings likely do not generalize to *any* goal. With respect to more valuable,

important, urgent goals, extant theories of goal disengagement likely do a better job of

characterizing how and why people give up on goals than the present research.

Third, and relatedly, this research is limited by an operationalization of goals that was

inherently defined by pursuers. We operationalized goals as New Year's resolutions, and so our

operationalization targets the kinds of things that people want to accomplish. This approach to

operationalization proved to produce goals that encompass and may even extend beyond the range of what most researchers consider to be goals. Yet, most resolutions either explicitly or by implication refer to a desired end state the person is motivated to attain. As such, although resolutions vary in concreteness and clarity, nearly all fit the broad definition of a goal.

This potential limitation of our study highlights a broader issue in research on goal disengagement. There is a discrepancy between how ordinary people think about goals and how researchers think about them. Although researchers use different conceptualizations and definitions, most understand goals to be mental representations of states that people want to approach or avoid (Elliot & Fryer, 2008). Typically, goals are thought of as hierarchically organized, with abstract values or motives guiding major life goals that in turn guide more specific goals and concrete action (Roberts et al., 2004). Across studies and researchers, different conceptualizations of goals vary dramatically in the importance of concreteness, level of intention, difficulty, time range, deliberateness, and complexity (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). In the minds of ordinary people, however, goals seem to inhabit the full range of these qualities and span all levels of the hierarchy at once. Everyday goals are dramatically varied along dimensions that theory tells us define goals and shape goal pursuit and its outcomes. Given this heterogeneity, there may be no single process that accurately characterizes how and why people sometimes give up on their goals.

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