

## Chapter 9 – *Creating Your Best Life* by Caroline Adams Miller, MAPP

### **Tattoos, License Plates, and Citrusy Scents**

*We must always tell what we see. Above all, and this is more difficult, we must always see what we see.*

—[Charles Peguy](#)

In this chapter we teach you how to become a detective in your own life around the subject of “primes” (cues in your environment that prompt you to think or behave in a specific way) so that you can become aware of which ones are helping and which ones are hurting your goals. On the strength of your legwork, we will help you decide which connections you can encourage, and which ones you can remove, in order to energize your life list.

#### Acting Like a Superhero

What if you had a way to get something accomplished on your life list, and it didn’t involve any real effort on your part? What if not only didn’t it involve any effort, but you weren’t even consciously aware of the fact that you were making progress on your goals while you were doing it, but you were? Well, have we got a deal for you! Some of the most powerful and convincing research in recent years involves the myriad ways our pursuit of goals is shaped, harmed, and helped by the “primes” in our everyday environment. These primes take many forms, including words, sounds, colors, smells, situations, and people that prompt us to behave in certain ways—sometimes without our knowledge or complicity. We encounter them from the moment we get up in the morning to the moment we go to bed at night, and as much as 80 percent of our day’s activity is directed by our unthinking reactions to these cues.

If you don’t believe it yet, consider the following scenarios:

*You are an undergraduate at Princeton University, and you have been given an assignment to write about the qualities of superheroes, and how they would behave in a given situation.*

*Another group of students is given the assignment to write about the items in their dorm rooms.*

*You finish your superheroes assignment and go on with your life. Three months later you fill out a questionnaire about what you’ve been up to. Experimenters parse your daily life and they find that if you were part of the group that wrote about the qualities of superheroes, you were four*

*times more likely to volunteer your time for a worthy cause than people who wrote about their dorm rooms.*

*Students playing an imaginary one-on-one investment game with someone they couldn't see were exposed to two conditions during the game. The first group of students played the game with a backpack on the table. The second group played the game with a professional-looking attaché case and a leather portfolio on the table. Students who played in the presence of the backpack were generous with their money, while those who played in the presence of the briefcase were much stingier. Students were later surprised to learn that they had behaved differently under these two conditions, and that the group that had been primed with the professional items had competed more ruthlessly to win.*

*Dutch psychologists asked undergraduate students to fill out a questionnaire in a solitary cubicle, and they then rewarded them with a crumbly biscuit. In the first experiment, the students filled out the questionnaire while a bucket of water sat nearby, giving off the odor of a lemon cleanser. The bucket was removed in the second experiment when another group of students filled out the same questionnaire. The psychologists filmed the areas where the students ate the crumbly biscuits and found that those who had smelled the citrusy cleanser were three times more likely to clean up after eating the biscuit than those who hadn't been exposed to the same odor.*

## Becoming a Detective

You are probably scratching your head after reading the paragraphs above, wondering why we are so gullible or unaware of our own reactions that we'll either tidy up or volunteer to help others because of something we smelled or an essay we wrote ninety days earlier. But this type of cutting-edge research on how our surroundings alter our behavior and cause us to react in certain ways is nothing short of overwhelming, and once you understand how you are impacted, you can use this research to your advantage.

Our files are filled with stories of clients who changed a huge number of things in their lives, including e-mail addresses, the color of their car, their eating and reading habits, their iPod song lineup, the organization of their desk at work, and more after learning about primes. You'll undoubtedly want to make a few changes, as well.

You will also see how to pair your primes with a sophisticated technique called "implementation intentions," also called "if-then scenarios," that have been shown in multiple studies to triple your likelihood of success with difficult goals; they also make goal pursuit easier by allowing you to conserve your energy.

Very high achievers already know these secrets, as they have either stumbled upon this combination of techniques through trial-and-error, or worked with psychologists who are privy to this research. We have many clients who have used it successfully in sports and other important life domains where optimal results are key to surviving and flourishing.

Until now, this research has not been available in book form for those of you who want to get an edge in life, but if you use these techniques in the right way at the right time, you will have the tools to override many of the cues your subconscious mind is heeding, and you will instead take control of your life and make your life list goals come true.

## Environmental Primes

First let's take a look at what is going on in your life right now, while you are reading this book. The color and design of the book jacket, the words you are taking in (and even the fonts) are having an impact on you, whether you know it or not. The room or location you are in is also impacting your mood, as are the clothes you're wearing. Look around where you are sitting or standing, particularly if you are at home. Are there pictures of loved ones nearby? Are there pictures of family members who have undermined you and not been supportive of your goals?

If you are at work, are there slogans on your desk—like “Think” or “Succeed”? If you glance at your computer, is your screensaver the company logo or a slideshow of your children's lives? And what is your e-mail address? Does it reflect a goal of yours or is it just a routine one like your name or your initials? Are there flowers nearby, or pictures of soothing scenes?

Look outside at your car. What color is it and what does the license plate say? Is it a routine string of numbers and letters, or is it a vanity plate you chose that says something like “Amen” or “Chaos”? Did you talk to anyone on the phone this morning? What type of mood was that person in? And did you read the newspaper, watch the morning news, or listen to the radio? What did you read, see, or hear?

Are you aware that every single one of these interactions and moments has the power to make you feel happier or sadder, and that your life list goals are either strengthened or undermined by them? Do you know what these influences do, and why?

Let's take a look at these ideas and scenarios, especially in light of the fact that our subconscious mind is as powerful as our conscious mind, and that if it is working against us because of the primes in our environment, we will be undercutting our efforts to achieve important goals without even being aware of it. Scientists are making daily progress in understanding the depth and breadth of how primes impact us, including our self-confidence and

commitment to various goals, and even what parts of our brains are stimulated in response to what we see, smell, or hear.

## The Hot Coffee Study

John A. Bargh, a professor of psychology at Yale University, has spent much of his professional life studying the role our subconscious mind plays on our behavior, and how this can be manipulated to decode how our brains work. In the following experiment, he and his colleagues demonstrated how an ordinary cup of coffee can influence whether we like or dislike another person.

This is how the experiment was set up: Students who were walking to a laboratory “ran into” a laboratory assistant who was juggling books, papers, textbooks, and a cup of iced or hot coffee. The students were asked to hold the cup briefly while the assistant regained control of the items. Later, the students who had held the cup of iced coffee rated a hypothetical person as cold, less social, and more selfish than people who had held the hot cup of coffee, who saw the hypothetical person in a more generous and kind light.

Bargh’s experiment, and those of others who work in the field, underscores the fact that our subconscious mind is always whirring in the background, making rational and irrational decisions that impact our thoughts and actions. Bargh presented the coffee study at a 2007 psychology conference with his coauthor, Lawrence Williams, and explained its importance to people who want to accomplish important goals or behave in certain ways, but who don’t always understand how or when they are thrown off course: “When it comes to our behavior from moment to moment,” he said, “the big question is, ‘What to do next?’ Well, we’re finding that we have these unconscious behavioral guidance systems that are continually furnishing suggestions through the day about what to do next, and the brain is considering and often acting on those, all before conscious awareness. . . . Sometimes those goals are in line with our conscious intentions and purposes, and sometimes they’re not.”

Sometimes we fail at nonconscious goals (that is, goals we don’t even know we have), prompting what researchers call “negative mystery moods.” A nonconscious goal is one that you have consistently and frequently chosen in the past for a certain situation, and that becomes triggered the moment you encounter the same cue, whether you are aware of it or not. For example, a teenager might have the conscious goal of making friends and looking good when she goes to a party, and that goal might be triggered later in life, every time she goes to a party as an adult. When she fails at her nonconscious goal, she may be mystified, not knowing that her bad mood is a direct result of this failure.

## Everyday Triggers

The implications of priming research are piling up quickly. A look at the compelling research, described below, will show you how much all of us are impacted every hour and every day by our surroundings, even when we are unaware of it. You may want to make some immediate changes in your life or the lives of your children after you've read this list.

**Hats and T-shirts with alcohol logos.** Middle school students who have been given logo wear and posters that depict alcohol products in a favorable light are more likely to drink at an early age than their peers who do not possess or wear similar items.

**Sad movies.** A multidisciplinary team of researchers from Carnegie Mellon, Harvard, Stanford, and the University of Pittsburgh found that people who were shown sad movie clips spent 300 percent more money on a water bottle than a group of people who were shown neutral movie clips. In every case, the people who had seen the sad movie clips insisted that their purchase of water at a hugely inflated price had nothing to do with watching the sad movie clips.

**Anagrams and word images that promote altruism and cooperation.** Researchers at the University of British Columbia decided to find out if a belief in God influenced moral behavior among people who were primed with religious words like “spirit,” “divine,” “sacred,” and “prophet.” In two studies, they found that both believers and nonbelievers were more likely to be altruistic when they solved anagrams containing these types of words instead of solving anagrams that included nonspiritual words, or even anagrams with words that pertained to social justice and civic involvement.

Similarly, students who had words like “dependable” and “support” subliminally flashed in front of them on a computer screen were more likely to behave cooperatively, even if they had no awareness that the words had appeared in front of them.

**Words that make you act old or bold.** John Bargh was behind another priming experiment that became famous when it was cited in the best-seller *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. In this experiment, Bargh actually got his subjects to walk more slowly down a hallway after making four-word sentences out of word strings like “sunlight makes temperature wrinkle raisins.” All of the word strings contained words that primed the brain to think about becoming older (other words used included “Florida” and “retired”), and that was all it took to influence youthful men and women to behave like old people.

In another word experiment that Bargh was part of, students unscrambled one of two sentences and then were instructed to go down a hallway to get their next assignment, where an instructor was conveniently “too busy” to attend to them. Students who were primed with words like “disturb,” “intrude,” and “infringe” interrupted the instructor after about five minutes, but 82 percent of the people primed with words like “yield” and “courteous” never interrupted at all. (These were impatient New Yorkers, so the researchers were especially impressed!)

**Photographs and names of supportive people.** One study found that subjects who had subliminal images or the names of supportive people flashed in front of them had very powerful reactions when subsequently asked about their goals. Compared to a control group that had a random string of letters flashed in front of them, the subjects who were primed with names and images of significant others were:

1. More likely to believe that they could be successful with their goals
2. More likely to work hard at accomplishing their goals
3. More willing to spend time in the company of people who had similar goals
4. More likely to come up with creative solutions to accomplish those goals
5. More likely to have high standards for themselves if their romantic partner had very high standards, as well

**Achievement pictures.** Although images and the mere mention of important people in our lives have an impact on our emotions and behavior, a picture of a runner crossing a finish line can produce even more zealous commitment to a goal such as fund-raising! In the first study of how priming can impact a conscious goal in a work setting, Gary Latham found that people who were given fund-raising guidelines raised more money when they had a picture of a runner crossing a finish line on the cover of the guidelines than they did if they were given the same guidelines without the picture.

**Junk-food advertising.** A 2005 study by Indiana University for the Kaiser Family Foundation did the largest examination ever on the impact of television food marketing on young viewers. The study showed that the number one type of ad seen by viewers between the ages of eight and twelve was for high-fat, high-sugar foods—an average of twenty-one ads per day, or fifty-one hours per year. No commercials promoted fruit or vegetables, a finding that fuels support for the

argument that kids are “brainwashed” by constant exposure to ads for unhealthy foods, contributing to the fact that this generation is the unhealthiest and most obese in the history of the United States, and the first generation that is unlikely to live longer than their parents.

**Music.** Elizabeth Cady, a cognitive psychology doctoral student at Kansas State University, studied 124 college freshmen and sophomores, asking them to describe their strongest positive memory from a group of songs popular in their childhood and youth. She included artists such as Vanilla Ice, New Kids on the Block, and Queen. The students either heard a minute of the song, or they glimpsed the song title, the album cover, or a picture of the artist. When the cues were removed, the students wrote down all of their memories, including how vivid or pleasant they were. All of the students were able to record strong memories from their youth, both positive and negative, showing how the power of music is universal. Hearing the music clip wasn’t the only way to create their powerful feelings and thoughts, though; Cady was surprised to find that seeing the lyric or a picture of the artist was just as strong a prime as actually hearing the song for changing mood and evoking nostalgia.

## The Primes of Your Life

If researchers have found over and over that we are swayed emotionally and behaviorally by subconscious primes, and that these cues can cause us, in some instances, to become happier and more energetic, and in others, more depressed or angry, we owe it to ourselves to become our own detectives and pay close attention to the types of visual, emotional, physical, musical, and situational cues that we may be reacting to in our lives. Take a moment right now to look at your immediate environment and make a list of some of the objects, sights, smells, sounds, and people around you. Then write down how they make you feel.

### Positive Primes

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### Negative Primes

- 1.

2.

3.

## How to Overcome Negative Primes

Here are real-life examples from some of our clients who took proactive steps to create positive environments and situations after they realized that certain primes were eliciting behavior that didn't help them accomplish their life list goals.

*Andrea grew up in a household where her parents were mean and always at war, and they seldom paid attention to their children's goals or lives. Whenever Andrea did accomplish something, her mother, who always compared her unfavorably to her friends, devalued it. Andrea decided that she was under no obligation to have family pictures around her house that reminded her of her miserable childhood and the negative messages she'd gotten all her life. So when she was in her mid-forties, Andrea went to an antiques store and bought a series of pictures from an estate sale that depicted someone else's family. Andrea gave all of the black-and-white images names, and she hung them on her walls. This new "family" is her daily reminder that she doesn't need to be held hostage by her family's negative messages. Pretending that strangers are her family also makes her smile and gives Andrea a feeling of empowerment that carries over into other areas of her life.*

*Linda read in an alternative health newsletter that going on a "news fast" would be a good way for her to eliminate unnecessary negative emotions from her life. She thought it was a good idea but wasn't sure why or how it might work for her, especially because she had a job that demanded that she be up-to-date on current events in Washington, D.C. After working with her life coach, she understood that she was probably taking on negative moods from more than just her morning newspaper, so she decided to do several different things that would ensure that she was both upbeat and knowledgeable about the news when she arrived at work. First, she changed her morning alarm to a song that elicited the happiest memory she could think of, and she even made it her cell phone ring tone so that she could hear the song multiple times every day. Next, she created a Google desktop for her homepage, and customized the content to reflect the news that she needed for her job. She also added feeds from blogs and Web sites that were devoted to publishing upbeat, happy news. Next, she signed up for a satellite radio network that had a channel that not only featured positive tips of the day during drive time, but also allowed her to listen to the news in a way that gave her more control. The morning newspaper and television shows were eliminated from her life, but instead of performing the recommended wholesale "news fast," she came up with a solution that made sense to her on an intellectual level, and that still met the needs of her job and life.*

## Clever Primes

The number of new primes you can create in your life to elicit better goal-directed behavior is limited only by your imagination, and we hope the following ideas can help elicit positive results in your life right away.

**Fantazein clock.** This ingenious little clock has a floating liquid crystal display that gives you to the power to program up to twenty messages that can flash all day in blue or red. One athlete who purchased this clock and programmed it to flash his time goals swears that he has achieved every single goal he has ever put into the clock, which flashes new and different messages from his bedroom desk all day and all night, depending on what he is trying to accomplish.

**New e-mail address.** Although you might be limited by company rules about the type of e-mail address you can have at work, it's always possible to get a free e-mail account that has an address of your own creation, and that primes you to think about your goals. One investment broker we worked with, who wanted to remind himself that his slow, methodical approach to goal accomplishment would pay off, created an e-mail address that included the name "GrittyTurtle." Another client, a landscaper who wanted to remind herself of her mission to help others create gardens of beauty and grace, changed her e-mail address to "LuvYourGarden2Day."

**Vanity license plates.** Imagine driving down the highway and seeing a car in front of you that has a vanity plate that reads, "SPDR CER." Would you want to get any closer? Probably not. But what do you think the impact is of seeing the following (real!) license plates on either your own car or someone else's?: "ALELUIA," "BLESSED," "THANKS," "AQWAMAN," "WEHV FUN," "PEGHAPY," or "LUV4KDZ"? And what would be the impact on your mood if you had these plates, or you saw them on someone else's car?: "BADKIDS," "MAGNATE," "RUTHLES," or "F-IRAC"?

Car magnets make terrific primes, and instead of being permanently affixed like bumper stickers, they can be moved around on a car, or put anywhere they can stick, like a filing cabinet or a refrigerator door.

**Tattoos.** Athletes love to prime their bodies with tattoos reminding themselves of their aspirations, so it's not uncommon to see the Olympic rings permanently emblazoned somewhere, whether its on the back of swimmer Ed Moses or on the hand of Maurice Greene, one of the top sprinters in the world, whose "GOAT"

tattoo reminds himself to train as hard as possible so that he will become the “Greatest of All Time.”

Unfortunately, tattoos can remind people to have violent and self-destructive goals, too, as in the case of gunman Steven Kazmierczak, who opened fire in a Northern Illinois University lecture hall where he killed several innocent students in 2008. Just six months earlier, he had an angel of death surrounded by drops of blood tattooed on his arm in a prominent place.

**Cell phone ring tones.** Music has been found to make people more energetic and happy, as well as to elicit memories and images that can support goal pursuit, so a large number of our clients now use their cell phone ring tones strategically. For example, one client wakes up in the morning to the theme song from sitcom *Happy Days*, which makes her think the word “happy” for hours after hearing it. Many people have the ability to create their own ring tones, which opens up a world of possibilities from the spoken word to a favorite song on the radio. Don’t overlook the opportunity to create a banner on your cell phone faceplate that states your goals!

**Charm bracelets.** For women, wearing charms on a bracelet can serve as a reminder of such things as a child’s birth, a vacation they loved, an honor they achieved, or a hobby they love—all things that make them proud and happy.

**Happy pictures.** The power of pictures to change our mood is so well documented that this is one of the easiest primes you can institute in your life. Pictures that make you think happy thoughts can be used on computer screensavers, digital photo frames, computer-generated calendars, photo mugs, key chains, refrigerator magnets, T-shirts, and so much more. One woman even decided to ditch her designer handbag in favor of one that featured a photo collage of her three children. “Why would I carry a purse with a designer’s name on it when I can look at my children’s faces all day, and even explain the purse to people who admire it whenever I carry it?” one of our clients marveled.

**Vision boards.** Vision boards are an old favorite of goal-setting specialists, even if you’re unaware of why the research about primes makes them such effective tools. Vision boards that reflect short-term and long-term goals are very powerful ways to remind yourself of your goals, particularly if you sprinkle them with inspiring words, phrases, and pictures of people believe in you.

You can make your own vision board with poster board, a selection of pictures, newspaper headlines, or anything else that inspires you to think and behave in a goal-directed way. You can choose a specific goal or a set of goals to accomplish over a specific time and put it on your vision board, or you can make a collage of these items, including pictures of people who are role models, or who believe in you. Use color as much as you like, including stickers, Magic Markers, and anything else that enlivens the board. Priming words can include “Joy!” or “Smile!” or “Win!” Put your vision board in a place where you can see it every day, at the office, in your kitchen, or on your closet door.

## Not Tonight, Honey

Sandra drives home from her job, anticipating the night of warm showers and enjoyable sex that she has planned with her husband via e-mail during the day. They have taken turns adding things that they both are looking forward to, and it reminds Sandra of how excited they were when they were just newlyweds, before they had bills, professional obligations, children, or worries about their elderly parents.

Sandra’s mood changes a tiny bit as she pulls up to her house, but it’s not particularly noticeable on a conscious level. As she walks into the house, though, and sees a mess in the kitchen, the children’s homework on various tables, and no signs of dinner being prepared, her mood changes from anticipation to anger. Then her husband, Roger, who has come home early in excitement, bounds down the stairs to greet her with a big kiss, and instead of joy, she experiences a surge of anxiety.

Needless to say, an anticipated evening of mutual pleasure and connection fizzles again, just like countless other nights, despite a day of imaginative planning on both Sandra’s and Roger’s parts. Her reaction to his greeting is “Not tonight, honey,” causing Sandra to doubt her real love for her husband. “What’s wrong with me?” she wonders as she stomps around the kitchen, cleaning up from breakfast, starting a hurried dinner, consulting the calendar for carpooling duties, and wondering if she should get an estimate on repainting the front of the house.

“Do I need a workshop on Tantric sex? Isn’t that what they said on that talk show the other day?” She suddenly worries that she’s “cold,” like her mother, which is what Roger has muttered in disappointment on numerous occasions when this has happened. This is Sandra’s worst fear, so it hurts and scares her every time Roger dumps his anger on her when he is disappointed about not getting his sexual needs met. Or maybe it’s menopause . . . She doesn’t know, but she wants an answer that doesn’t smack of drugstore therapy.

The hardest thing for Sandra to understand is why her excitement melted the minute she walked into her house and saw and smelled evidence that she had a number of important jobs to do immediately while everyone else languished in their bedrooms. Why couldn't she just walk away from these messes and hold on to her good mood? Would intimacy never be a part of her married life again? On that night, like so many others, Sandra cried herself to sleep while Roger read his book quietly, thinking his own dark thoughts. Can this marriage be saved?

## Shielding Your Goals

The all-too-common scenario described above, which ended in disappointment for both Sandra and Roger, has nothing to do with physical problems, hormones, stale sex routines, or even irresponsible kids. In fact, it is an example of what goal-setting experts call a classic case of “conflicting primes,” and it’s one that you will need to learn to solve if you want to accomplish all of your goals in every realm of your life, and not just the bedroom.

Researchers have studied what happens when you enter an environment and receive stimuli that prime a number of thoughts and behaviors that are unrelated, but that pertain to goals that are meaningful to you. If you are completely unaware of what is happening to you, your “focal” goal—in Sandra’s case having a night of fun sex after the kids go to bed—is undermined because other primes—a mess to clean up, food to prepare, homework to check, none of which have anything to do with the desired intimacy—have taken over. As Sandra mindlessly attends to these tasks while angrily stewing over them all the while, not only will she do all of them poorly in all likelihood, but she will continue to be in the mood that her husband interprets as “inhibited.”

What could Sandra have done differently? Experts who have studied situations like this one have come up with two effective solutions to shield your goals when you are primed in a variety of ways, against your will:

**Remove all distractions.** If you are not derailed by conflicting primes, you will not have to deal with any conscious or subconscious distractions. This is why Sandra and Roger have great sex whenever they are away on vacation or outside the house, and why marriage counselors often suggest “spicing up” your sex life with different locations, outfits, and behaviors. All primes that conflict with the focal goal are gone, leaving a clear path to goal accomplishment, and no emotional or physical distractions.

One of the ways single-sex schools shield the goal of maximizing educational opportunities is by keeping the distraction of the opposite sex out of the classroom. NFL football coaches are

infamous for banning wives and children from the hotel rooms of their players before big games so that they will keep their focus on the upcoming football game.

**Remind yourself repeatedly of the focal goal, despite conflicting primes.** This step requires that you have an exquisite understanding of yourself and the ways in which every person, situation, and cue changes your mood and makes you behave differently. Sandra could have left the dishes in the sink and ignored the homework mess and focused only on how she wanted her night to unfold, but she allowed herself to get caught up in the drama of family life, instead. A few extra stern reminders to herself might have allowed her to enjoy her night of intimacy.

Special Forces training involves teaching members to “focus on the mission” when they face distractions like bad weather, enemy maneuvers, and other activities that could jeopardize what they have set out to do. One Green Beret said he used the mantra “The mission is all that matters” whenever he needed to remind himself of what he needed to accomplish. You can use this same statement when you notice that your focus has fallen away from your goal because of conflicting primes.

## If-Then Scenarios That Triple Your Chances of Success

*There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.*

—*Anonymous*

As researchers have increasingly dug into the topic of goal accomplishment and the various ways we can make ourselves more or less likely to fail, a unique and very successful theory has emerged from the University of Konstanz in Germany, where a professor named Peter Gollwitzer has found a simple way to triple your likelihood of success.

Gollwitzer started with the observation that of the four phases of goal pursuit—predecisional, preactional, actional, and postactional—the hardest step is between preactional and actional. This is the critical moment when someone takes a goal and then chooses to move forward with a specific activity that makes the accomplishment more likely. For example, if Mary has the goal of learning how to play the piano (preactional), but she never carves out the time to look for a teacher (actional), her goal will remain a pipedream.

Gollwitzer decided to test his hypothesis by using environmental primes—like seeing a coffeepot or walking into a certain building—to prompt a person with a conscious goal to take a specific action that would help him or her make progress and go from preactional to actional.

An example of a statement attaching an action to a prime is “When I see the lawnmower on Sunday morning, I will fill it with gasoline.” Another example is “When I see the candy dish on Jane’s desk, I will keep walking so that I don’t stop and help myself to sweets that I don’t need.”

Gollwitzer calls these scenarios “if-then” situations, also known as “implementation intentions.” He thought that not only would they help people stay focused on their mission, but they would also allow them to notice and take action on things that they might have missed because they were engrossed in another task.

Here is the “implementation intention” sentence we use with our clients for our life list approach:

When I encounter a specific situation [thought, person, visual cue, etc.], I will do the following thing [behave a certain way, say a certain thing, think a certain thought] so that I can achieve [the goal].

Gollwitzer has shown over and over, along with other researchers in this field, just how important this if-then step is if you want to maximize your chances of succeeding. Because these steps are so powerful when they are taken, Gollwitzer calls them “instant habits.”

Here is just a sample of the studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of “instant habits.”

*Almost one hundred college students were asked to select a project that they wanted to complete during their Christmas break. Because this is a notoriously hard time of year to work, the students were unlikely to select and complete any work, according to them. But of the students who were asked to specify exactly what they were going to do, what situation they would use to prompt them to initiate goal-directed activity, and when they wanted to be done, 62 percent of the students who furnished their if-then scenarios were successful versus 22 percent who had not taken that extra step. Accomplished goals included writing a report, finishing a novel, and buying career-related textbooks.*

*Sixty male college students were recruited to watch videotaped statements that were hostile and racist. The students who were told to form implementation intentions about when they would speak up with their point of view (“When two minutes of the video have gone by, I will state my counterargument”) were three times more likely to present their opinions than students who were simply told to speak up whenever it felt appropriate to challenge the racist views.*

*Women who were told to make an appointment for a cervical cancer screening were divided into two groups. One group simply said that they would get an appointment, and 69 percent of them followed through. But more than 90 percent of the women who said that they had formed an if-then scenario (“I will call for my appointment after lunch on Tuesday,” for example) made the appointment.*

## Why Do Implementation Intentions Work So Effectively?

It's indisputable that attaching if-then statements to goals has a massive impact on follow-through, particularly with hard goals. Regardless of whether the goal was a health screening, dieting, or studying a certain number of hours for an independent study project, subjects who said that they would take a specific action at a certain time or in response to another cue usually enjoyed triple the success of their peers.

Gollwitzer and others believe that this little-understood technique gives goal setters several significant advantages over just going through the process of setting a goal:

**Removes ambivalence.** Creating an implementation intention removes all questions about whether or not you will pursue a goal. When you decide that you will take action at a specific time and in a specific way, you have removed the question of “Will I?” or “Won't I?” from the equation, making forward motion inevitable.

**Turns a negative situation into a positive one.** An antagonistic situation can be used to make a goal more likely instead of undercutting it. For example, if encountering a work colleague usually results in low self-confidence, an implementation intention can use the same person to stimulate a positive step forward. For example: “When I see Marcia in the meeting, I will be sure to make eye contact with her and state my views in a clear way, without getting rattled.”

**Saves energy.** People who take preprogrammed automatic actions conserve energy and willpower. Researchers studying self-regulation have repeatedly showed that controlling our behavior on the spur of the moment not only depletes glucose levels; it lowers our daily store of willpower. Actions that are familiar, or that rely on the environment to direct us to do something (like a street sign instructing us to turn right), are less tiring.

**Fosters habits.** When you follow through often enough on your implementation intentions, you create habits that become ingrained behaviors that will serve you well. For example, if you condition yourself to automatically get on your treadmill and walk five miles whenever you wear a certain exercise outfit or strap on a pedometer, you will vastly improve your chances of becoming a regular exerciser.

Implementation intentions (if-then scenarios) not only triple the likelihood of taking important actions toward accomplishing goals; they are most effective when used on hard-to-accomplish goals.

## Clocks and Chickens

*Habit is the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent.*

—*William James*

Once again, we can learn a lot from watching how elite athletes perform. With so much on the line, most of them have discovered how to avoid expending unnecessary energy and how to make it as easy as possible to accomplish heroic feats on a regular basis. Some of the athletes call their rituals “superstitions,” although they definitely fit the definition of primes. Swimming legend and Olympic gold medalist Mike Barrowman began his prerace ritual the night before big meets by eating a Big Mac sandwich. This familiar prime always started a chain of thoughts and predictable behaviors that he told people were partly responsible for putting him “in the zone” and leading to accomplishments including a world record that stood for a decade.

Baseball superstar Wade Boggs has been lampooned for the exceptional number of rituals that he follows to keep his body and brain always geared up and ready to perform on the baseball diamond. But a few of his rituals are worth noting because they are classic examples of how to make your environment work on your behalf so that you are constantly cued for optimal and specific outcomes. Here is just a sample of what Boggs does on a regular basis:

When he is training or it is a game day in St. Petersburg, Florida, Boggs leaves for

Tropicana Field at precisely 1:47 p.m.—not a moment before or moment later. (He has made the time on the clock the “if” condition, and leaving immediately to prepare for the game or practice is the “then.”)

When the center-field clock at Tropicana Field strikes 4:37 p.m., Boggs sprints toward third base, making sure to touch second base on the way.

Between pitches, Boggs swipes the dirt in front of him with his left foot, taps his glove two or three times, and adjusts his hat. (Between pitches is the “if,” and the “then” is made up of the actions that Boggs has learned will settle his mind and enhance his focus for the next pitch.)

When he comes to the plate to hit, Boggs draws letters denoting the word “*chai*”—Hebrew for “life”—in the dirt with his cleat for luck. (Again, like Barrowman’s ritual, this is an action that triggers certain things in Boggs’ behavior—possibly a certain batting stance—that he has learned will help him the most.)

## Winning If-Then Statements

Since implementation intentions have been found to be particularly effective with difficult goals, this is your chance to apply the science to your life list. Take a look at some of the goals that you want badly but that scare you. Perhaps these are the goals that truly excite you, but you can't seem to move forward with them. We love to see how our clients use if-then statements to help them initiate behaviors that will take them closer to creating the life they want. Here are just a few of the ones they have created to successfully accomplish their life list goals:

When I arrive at the Christmas party and see Peter, I will get something to eat and ask him if he'll go out to lunch with me this week.

When my alarm goes off in the morning, I will immediately turn on the light and get ready to leave for swim practice.

When I see my gym bag in the car, I will immediately drive to the workout facility for my class.

When I wear my red power tie, I will make three sales calls before 10 a.m. that day.

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*To learn more about Caroline Miller and find out how to hire her to work with your organization or speak about topics like goal-setting and grit, please visit [www.carolinemiller.com](http://www.carolinemiller.com), or contact Michele Lucia at [Michele@carolinemiller.com](mailto:Michele@carolinemiller.com).*