

Beyond good intentions: Prompting people to make plans improves follow-through on important tasks.

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### Abstract

Summary:

People fail to follow through on all types of important intentions, including staying fit, studying sufficiently, and voting. These failures cost individuals and society by escalating medical costs, shrinking lifetime earnings, and reducing citizen involvement in government. Evidence is mounting, however, that prompting people to make concrete and specific plans makes people more likely to act on their good intentions. Planning prompts seem to work because scheduling tasks makes people more likely to carry them out.

They also help people recall in the right circumstances and in the right moment that they need to carry out a task. Prompts to make plans are simple, inexpensive, and powerful interventions that help people do what they intend to get done. They also avoid telling people what to do, allowing people to maintain autonomy over their own decisions.



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**Summary.** People fail to follow through on all types of important intentions, including staying fit, studying sufficiently, and voting. These failures cost individuals and society by escalating medical costs, shrinking lifetime earnings, and reducing citizen involvement in government. Evidence is mounting, however, that prompting people to make concrete and specific plans makes people more likely to act on their good intentions. Planning prompts seem to work because scheduling tasks makes people more likely to carry them out. They also help people recall in the right circumstances and in the right moment that they need to carry out a task. Prompts to make plans are simple, inexpensive, and powerful interventions that help people do what they intend to get done. They also avoid telling people what to do, allowing people to maintain autonomy over their own decisions.

**T**hat mole on Bob's arm was growing larger and darker than the others, and it had been two years since his last appointment with the dermatologist. He kept intending to get to the dermatologist for his semi-annual checkup. But when could he find the time? His team at work was short-staffed and he was juggling half a dozen projects. His aging mother across town needed his help keeping up her house. He wanted to spend whatever time was left with his wife and kids. Summer turned to fall, then to winter, then to spring. When Bob finally found the time to visit the dermatologist and learned that his mole was malignant, his most desperate

wish was that he had followed through faster to see the doctor.

When individuals fail to follow through on well-intentioned plans, significant negative consequences can follow. It may seem that those repercussions are theirs and theirs alone, but they can be costly for both individuals and society. Bob's surgery and chemotherapy, requiring repeated hospitalization, will cost his health insurer hundreds of thousands of dollars. High medical costs increase insurance costs for everyone. Bob, of course, will lose income while recovering. The emotional toll on Bob and his loved ones is a particularly steep cost.

Previous research suggests a troubling fact: failure to follow through happens more often than not. In other words, people fail to fulfill the majority of their

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