Turning *want to* into *will do*

The role of future-oriented plans in exercise behavior

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Introduction

Planning for future physical activity behavior is as critical for success as planning for a vacation. All of us to some degree plan for the future. Sometimes these plans are realized, other times they are not. Critical to converting a dream into reality are strategies associated with that plan. This article introduces the psychological construct of future-oriented self-perceptions, or "possible selves," and describes how possible selves are related to exercise behavior. Specifically, we examine how possible selves are formed and how they are linked with exercise, and we discuss the importance of associated plans and activities necessary to turn what we *want* to do into what we *will* do.

Most individuals have multiple possible selves, representing a range of desires and dreams for the future. Some possible selves are quite likely to be realized, while others, such as winning the lottery, are quite unlikely to occur. Possible selves that are well conceived, complex and accessible to the individual are most likely to result in behavior.

A few months ago, a group of friends traveled to Greece for business and pleasure. The travel partners researched the islands they wanted to visit, carefully planned how much luggage they should bring (some were better at this than others) and they made plane, hotel and even taxi reservations. They checked the exchange rates and weather reports, and changed their plans when necessary (flights between Greek islands are not entirely predictable). The purpose of this preparation was intended to insure a smooth, enjoyable visit. In the end, the trip was successful, in no small part because of the group's careful planning.

Planning for future activities facilitates success. Why then, are we such poor planners when it comes to our long-term physical activity behavior? Planning to be active, particularly over the long run, requires careful preparation. While we can't predict the future, we can all influence it by what we do now. All of us, at some level, think about what we want to be like in our adult and older adult years. We want to be healthy, a loving parent, partner or grandparent, and we want to be physically independent and financially secure. How do we reach those desired future states? That is the topic we'll discuss in this article. We will introduce a part of the self-concept known as "possible selves," and show how desired, and sometimes feared, future states can motivate our behavior. Importantly, we'll discuss the need to develop plans and strategies to go along with those possible selves. As the title implies, behavior is not automatic. It takes effort to turn what we *want to* do into what we *will do*.

Perceptions of ourselves

How we think about ourselves and our abilities — our perceptions — are consistently linked with our actual behavior (Whaley, in press). The self-concept is a term commonly used to define the totality of the self, made up of past and present experiences, as well as future desires. Contained within the self-concept is the evaluative component of the self, referred to as self-esteem. Self-esteem is multidimensional in nature, meaning that individuals can have different perceptions of themselves and their abilities in various contexts. For example, we can feel very good about ourselves in a social setting, while feeling much less positive about our abilities in physical activity. Self-esteem has become a buzzword in our culture, implicated in everything from academic performance to weight control, teen pregnancy and sport participation. Research supports the importance of self-esteem, with studies showing links between self-esteem and exercise participation (Garcia & King, 1991) and quality of life (Alfermann & Stoll, 2000). But other equally important components of the self have been shown to influence our behavior. It is important to study various components of the self if we are to truly understand why it is, for example, some people seem to be quite adept and comfortable participating in physical activity, while others feel quite

uncomfortable, even when they possess the same amount of actual ability.

One component of the self that is critical to understanding behavior is known as self-schema (Markus, 1977). Self-schema has to do with the large amount of information we are constantly receiving about ourselves. This information comes from people (feedback from others), objects (the impact of a ball on a racquet) or our own bodies (our hearts beating faster when we exercise). The brain has to sort out all this information, coding and organizing it in a way that makes action possible. According to Markus, we do this by creating packets of information about the self that she refers to as self-schemas. Self-schemas are cognitive generalizations about the self that relate to attributes or behaviors we consider very descriptive of us and very important to our self-concept. We can have multiple schemas, such as exerciser, basketball player and poet. Importantly, the presence of a schema for a behavior is considered critical to future participation in that activity (Cross & Markus, 1994). In this way, schemas serve as the foundation for representations of oneself in the future. These future-oriented self-conceptions have been labeled "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves

Possible selves are images that include scripts (mental representations of events), plans and behavioral control strategies for achieving a goal (Aloise-Young, Hennigan & Leong, 2001). They are distinct from the construct of goals, which Sheldon and Emmons (1995) have described as behavior stated in intentional terms. An illustration of this difference can be seen in an individual who wants to find ways to become active. She may set a specific goal to meet those objectives; say, to exercise three times per week. In contrast, her possible self about exercise might be something like, "to be an active person." This possible self serves as a blueprint for achieving her goals. It will indicate pathways, provide a means to an end and answer the question "how do I get there?" General goal setting rarely provides such guidance and typically only answers the question "what do I want?" Possible selves allow an individual to "put herself into" both approaching and realizing the goal. In this way, possible selves work to facilitate the goal- setting process and subsequent behavior.

Possible selves are related to a variety of behaviors, from predicting risky behaviors in adolescents (Stein, Roeser & Markus, 1998) to decisions related to exercise (Whaley, 2001). Possible selves can be positive, hoped-for images of the self one strives to achieve (to be healthy; to win the lottery), or negative, feared images the individual desires to avoid (to be dependent on others; to be homeless). Most individuals have multiple possible selves, representing a range of desires and dreams for the future. Some possible selves are quite likely to be realized, while others, such as winning the lottery, are quite unlikely to occur. Possible selves that are well conceived, complex and accessible to the individual are most likely to result in behavior (Stein & Markus, 1996). For example, an individual with a possible self of being a healthy older person should have associated with that self a variety of strategies and plans in place to help insure that possible self becomes a reality. These plans are referred to as *self-regulatory strategies* and include such things as the importance attached to a possible self, how capable an individual feels of achieving (or avoiding) a possible self, or actual goals and plans specific to that self. In addition to these strategies, possible selves contain an emotional component that further strengthens the link between motivation and behavior.

One of the strongest emotions associated with motivation and behavior is fear, and this emotion is the basis of feared possible selves. However, fear is typically motivational only when people feel as though they have an effective strategy for coping (Aloise-Young et al., 2001). Many behavioral patterns contain the fear of a negative outcome, such as failing a class, paired with a desired outcome (learning the material and making a good grade). Various coping strategies (attending class and studying) are designed to realize the desired goal while simultaneously avoiding what could happen. Thus, feared selves alone may not be as strongly linked to behavior for two reasons: (a) fear has a disorganizing effect on behavior and is less likely to promote a reasoned course of action, and (b) strategies aimed at avoiding an undesirable outcome tend to be less effective than those developed toward achieving a desired goal (Aloise-Young et al., 2001). Instead, feared possible selves combined with desired goals (hoped-for selves) are most amenable to behavior change.

Hoped-for selves and behavior

Positive, hoped-for selves are significant motivators for future behaviors. An important function for hoped-for selves is the chance to "test out" desired roles (Whaley, in press). For instance, an individual who holds a hoped-for self as an exerciser may be motivated to attend fitness classes in order to test out that possible self. As she begins to feel more comfortable at this role, she will take on the exerciser identity and further focus her behavior by making plans for continuing her activity even when other activities come up that might interfere with her exercise (bad weather, time constraints). This commitment differs from simply setting goals in that she is making exercise a part of her life rather than simply a part of her day. Thus, from

a motivational stance, it is a good idea to have richly detailed possible selves that effectively combine hoped-for, anticipated selves that are important to that individual.

Research has shown that individuals across age groups can identify and articulate possible selves important to them (Cross & Markus, 1991; Whaley, 2001). Cross and Markus (1991) found that young adults, aged 18-24, had a greater number of possible selves and indicated that they felt more capable of realizing or avoiding their possible selves than older adults, aged 60 and older. The youngest group also reported the fewest number of actions taken to realize their most important hoped-for self. In contrast, older adults had fewer selves but devoted more energy to those possible selves, suggesting that possible selves may serve a much greater motivational function with age. Hooker (1992) examined the differences in possible selves between college students and older adults and found that older adults were more likely to have possible selves in the health domain than college students. Both Cross and Markus (1991) and Hooker and Kaus (1994) found that young, middle-aged and older adults most often cited feared selves in the health domain and were more likely to have feared health-related selves than hoped-for health-related selves. Hooker (1992) offered the explanation that health is a concern for all individuals but becomes increasingly incorporated into the self as the individual ages. Thus, older adults are more likely to have hoped-for and feared health-related possible selves, and are more likely to engage in health protective behaviors as a way of achieving those selves. Of course, being physically active is one way of helping an individual achieve health-related selves.

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The physical domain

Recent research on possible selves has been extended to the physical domain (Whaley, 2001). The study examined the possible selves of middle-aged women across a range of exercise behaviors — from inactive to long-term exercisers — and found that exercisers differed from non-exercisers in both the content of possible selves and the plans for achieving or avoiding them. Specifically, non-exercisers cited hoped-for and feared possible selves relating to body image more often than exercisers. For non-exercisers, a common hoped-for self was "to become a trim, fit person" while a common feared self was "to avoid being a person with too much fat." In contrast, many exercisers cited a physical hoped-for self paired with a health-related feared self. For this group, a common hoped-for self was "to be fit as [I] grow older" while a common feared self was "to avoid getting sick." The link between the hoped-for and feared selves of the non-exercisers often lacked the planning component that the exercisers exhibited, turning a desired future state into a wish. Consider the following example, which compares the hoped-for and feared self of an exerciser with a non-exerciser. The words in parentheses have been added to illustrate how the two possible selves appear to be related:

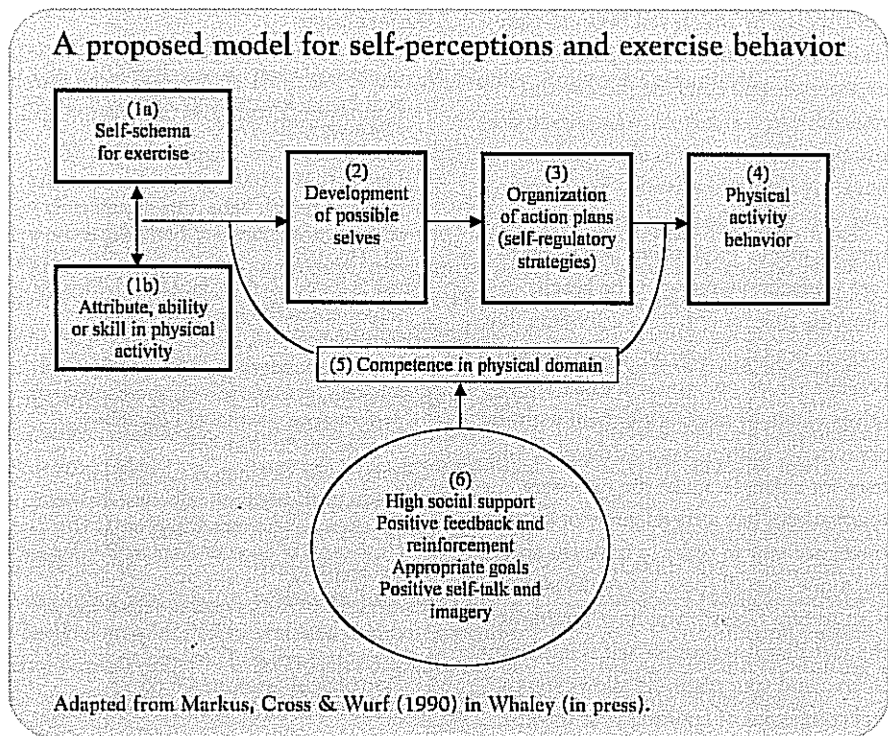
Exerciser: "I want to remain active (in order to prevent?) becoming overweight and having health problems."

Non-exerciser: "I want to be a healthy adult (but?) I don't want to be overweight in five years."

Research has indicated that possible selves are more likely to be realized when they are tied to current identities (Stein & Markus, 1996) because those possible selves include more strategies and procedures needed to achieve a desired state (Cross & Markus, 1991). The quotes illustrate that the exerciser's hoped-for self is to remain active, while the non-exerciser's hoped-for self is to be healthy, implying that she currently does not see herself as healthy. The exerciser sees her possible self of remaining active as a way to avoid the undesired self of becoming overweight, and exercise is the way to accomplish that goal. The non-exerciser wants to be healthy, but the connection between being healthy and being active is not present. Instead, this person tries to connect being healthy with not being overweight, which is a negative role she is trying to avoid. As previously mentioned, possible selves afford opportunities to "try out" roles and eventually develop identities; therefore, with the non-exercisers, it is a matter not only of motivation but of framing their possible selves in such a way that they are more likely to be realized. In the above example, the exerciser knows what it took to get in shape and realizes what it will take to attain her future exercise goals based on past experiences and accomplishments. The non-exerciser needs help in developing that same sort of plan to achieve her hoped-for selves and to avoid feared selves.

Future physical activity

How can we use possible selves to help us better prepare for our physical activity behavior in the future? A starting point comes from the model pictured on this page (Whaley, in press). Beginning with Boxes (1a) and (1b) at the left side of the diagram, the prerequisites for possible selves are the physical ability to exercise and a self-schema for exercise behavior. Fortunately, most of us have the physical ability to do some sort of physical activity. While it is true that the more physically active you are the more benefits you accrue, even low to moderate intensity exercise, such as walking, will result in health benefits. If you see yourself as an exerciser and believe this is an important part of your identity, then the schema portion of the model is fulfilled. But what if you don't have this schema? A potential reason may be an issue of language. Some adult and older adult women may not relate to the label of exerciser (Whaley & Ebbeck, in press). These individuals see an exerciser as someone who is more fit, exercises more frequently or is simply younger than they are. This clearly should not be the case. But even with all the gains recognized by women in the sport world, we continue to underestimate our abilities and perceive ourselves to be less capable and less competent in physical endeavors than males do. Strategies that may be helpful include putting a label on your activity behavior that is comfortable for you, such as active individual, and of embracing your athletic self instead of minimizing it. For those trying to add a new exerciser schema, it should help to go through the formal steps someone would take when embracing any new identity. You might, for example, purchase the attire, learn the language, imagine yourself successfully pursuing physical activity and rely on others, such as friends and family, who reinforce your identity as an exerciser. These steps should help you establish an exerciser schema.



Adapted from Markus, Cross & Wurf (1990) in Whaley (in press).

Once a schema is present, the model predicts that future-oriented conceptions consistent with that identity will be formed (Box 2). For an exerciser, an example would be to have a possible self as "a healthy older adult." Most of us have that type of possible self. What we tend to lack are the goals and strategies that enable that behavior to be realized (Box 3). Once we have a fully developed action plan in place, the inevitable result will be physical activity behavior (Box 4). But how do we develop those action plans? What if the appropriate possible selves are not accessible because we haven't made the link between our current self (exerciser, non-exerciser) and our future self (healthy, independent adult)? Those issues are addressed in Box 5 and Circle 6.

A key issue in establishing the strategies and plans needed to develop possible selves is one of perceived competence (Box 5). Perceived competence can be defined as having confidence in your ability to be successful in physical tasks and behaviors. The lines connecting this box with Boxes 2, 3 and 4 implies that feeling competent is important in developing possible selves and, through further defining one's possible selves and the plans associated with them, we can increase our perceptions of competence. Circle 6 represents strategies that can be used to support and encourage perceptions of and actual competence. For example, look for social support, positive feedback and encouragement from others, and offer them the same. Exercise classes should teach an individual how to set appropriate and sensible goals and to use positive self-talk and imagery to help "fill out" one's possible selves. These skills and techniques have been found to effectively influence the behavior of athletes in sport contexts, and should be no less effective in exercise contexts.

The best way to illustrate this model is to return to the opening image of taking a vacation. Think of schema as the