



# Mental Contrasting & Implementation Intentions

## Self-regulation strategies improve self-discipline in adolescents: benefits of mental contrasting and implementation intentions

Angela Duckworth



### Principle

Contrasting what you want with obstacles that might get in the way of taking action to get there and then writing a statement about what you will do when you encounter those obstacles can help us reach our goals.

### Quote

“Adolescents can learn self-regulatory strategies that substantially improve the achievement of valued academic goals.”

### So What - Application

If mental contrasting and implementation intentions can work for high school sophomores and studying over the summer, it seems worth a shot.

When we have a goal rather than just writing the goal in a journal or planner, we could take a few minutes to imagine the outcome and some current obstacles that will likely happen. Then brainstorm some options and write our own if-then statement. If [obstacle] happens, then I will [proposed solution].

This suggested activity is simple, practical, and only takes a few minutes.

### The Research Story

Five researchers from Pennsylvania and Germany studied 66 high school sophomores to see if mental contrasting and implementation intentions would help them do better on their goals of getting ready for the PSAT test.

Mental contrasting is imagining a positive outcome from doing the goal you've chosen, and then also imagining current obstacles that might prevent you from taking action. For example, I can imagine feeling good passing my midterm, but I'm too busy and distracted to study.

Implementation Intentions are a way to brainstorm possible solutions to the obstacles you see. They are formed in an if-then sentence like this. If the obstacle occurs, then I will do this solution. For example, if I think I'm too busy, I will sit at my desk and open my book and set a timer for 15 minutes.

In May they gave the students an English class assignment to help them practice for the PSAT. The assignment was a workbook that guided them

- How likely do you think it is that you will complete all 10 practice tests?
- How important is it to you to complete all 10 practice tests?
- Write 2 positive outcomes of completing all of the practice tests.
- Write 2 obstacle of present reality that could interfere with this task.
- The Control Group wrote about an influential person in their life.
- The MCII group imagined their positive outcome as vividly as possible and wrote about it. Then they wrote an if-then plan about their obstacle. If [obstacle] then I will [solution]. Then they did the same thing with the second outcome and obstacle.

In July they all got PSAT workbooks to practice with for the summer. Some students took PSAT prep courses that encouraged them to study and the girls completed more questions overall, so they had to do statistics to control for gender and whether they took a summer prep course.

The MCII Group did 60% more questions over the summer than the control group. In real numbers, the control group averaged 84 questions and the MCII group averaged 140.

It's interesting that a one-hour intervention could produce different results months down the road in summer when youth were not in school.

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Gollwitzer



Oettingen