



Hegenchen Dai

# Time Landmarks As New Beginnings

## Put Your Imperfections Behind You: Temporal Landmarks Spur Goal Initiation When They Signal New Beginnings



### Principle

Time landmarks separate you from your past mistakes and make it more likely you'll make a fresh start pursuing a goal.

### Quote

“temporal landmarks marking new beginnings inspire goal initiation in part by creating a psychological disconnect between a person's current and past inferior self.”

### So What - Application

If seeing a time landmark as a new beginning inspires goal initiation and disconnects your current efforts from your past, using temporal landmarks can motivate goal pursuit.

A novel approach to these time landmarks is to create our own. We may naturally set goals on our birthday or the first of the month, but waiting for time landmarks can waste time not pursuing what we want. Life Changing Principles teaches the principle of Goal Loops. Goal Loops create a landmark by summarizing past goal efforts with 3 questions: 1- What went well and why? 2- What didn't go well? 3- What did you learn? By relegating the past to a summarized experience you learned from, you separate yourself from your past failures, and create a fresh start. The beauty of goal loops is that you don't have to wait for a landmark in time, you can create your own fresh start landmark.

### The Research Story

Three researchers from Washing University and the University of Pennsylvania studied how temporal landmarks made people want to start new goals. Temporal landmarks include the beginning of a week, month, year, or semester, holidays, and personal life events like first date, weddings, birthdays, first move, or even traumatic life events.

They theorized that starting a goal on one of these landmarks separates them from their past selves, along with their past failures, mistakes, and weaknesses. When you feel separate from your past, three things can happen. Feeling disconnected from past failures may boost your self-efficacy, so you're more up for doing goals. People want to behave in ways that align with how they see themselves. If you're less tarnished by a past failure, you may behave more consistently with your new goals. A temporal landmark can create a clean slate where messing up seems like a bigger deal, so you make more efforts not to mess up.

They did 5 experiments to test these ideas.

Study 1A. They asked 165 people to choose a date for a text reminder for a self-chosen goal. More people chose a date labeled “first day of spring.”

Study 1B. They repeated study 1A with 278 students. More students chose a day labeled “1st day of Summer Break” versus “Admin Day” to start goals.

In a related study, more Jewish participants chose “Day after Yom Kippur” versus “278th day” because they saw it as a meaningful new beginning.

Study 2 asked 216 people to list 5 reasons this New Year was meaningful or ordinary. The group primed for a “meaningful” New Year read more goal literature than the group primed for an “ordinary” New Year.

Study 3 (399 participants) rated someone more likely to start goal-aligned activities on a meaningful date rather than mis-aligned activities.

Study 4 (300 participants) found that the fresh start date was associated with feeling more distant and separate from your past imperfect self.

People tend to start goals on time landmarks and assume motivation will be higher, partly because a fresh start distances them more from their past failed or imperfect goal efforts.

Dai, H., Milkman, K. L., & Riis, J. (2015). Put Your Imperfections Behind You: Temporal Landmarks Spur Goal Initiation When They Signal New Beginnings. *Psychological Science*, 26(12), 1927–1936.

