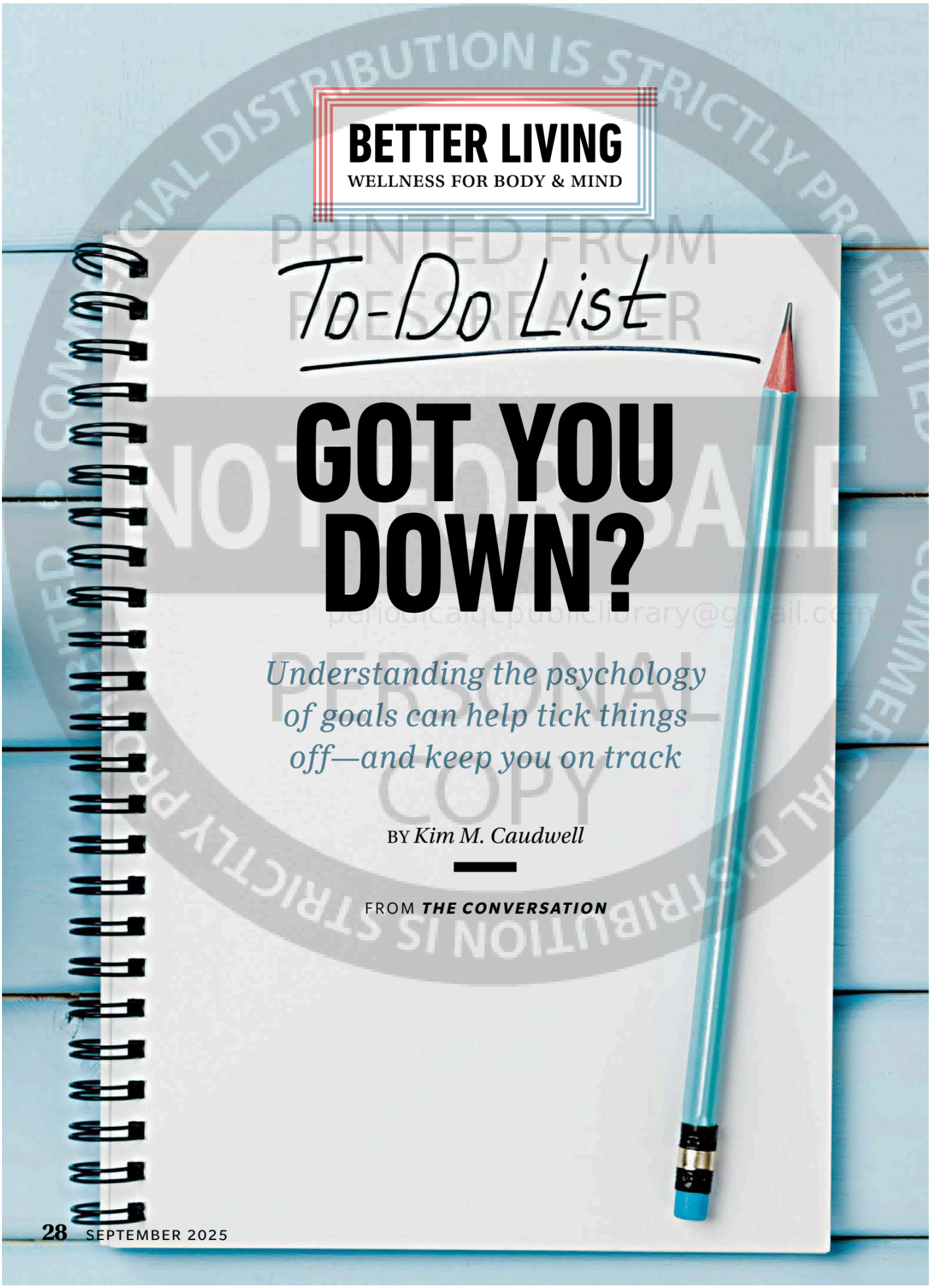
- Motivation



GOT YOU DOWN?

Understanding the psychology of goals can help tick things off—and keep you on track

BY *Kim M. Caudwell*

FROM ***THE CONVERSATION***

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It feels like we are living in busy times. According to 2024 data from the International Labour Organization, the average Indian worker clocks 46.7 hours each week, placing the nation among the top countries with the longest working hours.

Psychology has long been interested in our goals—our mental representations of desirable outcomes.

Much of this research is on how we form, pursue and attain goals, plus how goals make us feel.

Across studies, we see a consistent pattern of successful goal pursuit and well-being. So, having time to work towards our goals is important.

With this in mind, what is the best way to get things done—and how can we get better at achieving our goals, especially when we feel time poor?

MAKE A LIST

Most of us approach multiple goals with the age-old 'to-do' list. First, you write down everything you need to do. Then you 'check' or tick things off as you do them.

One reason to-do lists are useful is because we are more likely to remember things we haven't completed, rather than things we have. This is known as the Zeigarnik effect. While to-do lists are easy to write, they don't always work. There are, however, various approaches for to-do lists that may improve their effectiveness.

Another thing to consider is the wide range of apps, tools and platforms that can make tasks more fun and outsource mental load. Adding elements of game play like point scoring or competition—called 'gamification'—can help people work towards goals in educational and work settings. Similarly, app based reminders can help people reach physical rehabilitation goals and form good exercise habits.



TO-DO LISTS MAY BE EASY TO WRITE, BUT THEY DON'T ALWAYS WORK

FINDING YOUR 'WHY'

Researchers have focussed a lot on the psychology of why people pursue goals—and how this affects their

ALL PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

approach to tasks. For example, some people want to complete a university degree because they want to get a job. Others may be more interested in developing skills or knowledge. In both cases, there is a desired outcome—albeit with differing reasons.

Our goals can be differentiated by who or what is driving them. Goals that feel like our own, and for which we experience a sense of intrinsic motivation, are known as 'self-concordant'. These goals represent enduring personal interests, are aligned with values and are positively linked to well-being.

Goal orientation theory offers a similar perspective. Using the same example, you may study so you score well on a test (a performance goal) or because you want to be sure you develop your knowledge (a mastery goal). Mastery goals tend to lead to better results and self-regulation.

JUGGLING GOALS—FOUR TO-DO TIPS

So, what happens when we have multiple—perhaps even competing—goals, or goals that aren't so enjoyable? We might want to finish writing a report or assignment, then read a few chapters of a textbook—but also go to the gym and binge a few episodes of our favourite TV show. In such scenarios, psychological science offers some insights into how we might stay task-focused and on track to tick more items off our to-do list.

1 BEWARE THE PLANNING FALLACY

This happens when we underestimate the amount of resources (such as time) it will take to reach a goal. As writer and religious thinker William Penn put it: "Time is what we want most, but what we use worst". Think through the all the steps and time required to complete your goal.

2 MONITOR YOUR PROGRESS

Incorporating goal monitoring into an activity can boost progress. And reviewing your estimations and expectations against your actual times and achievements can be used to calculate a 'fudge ratio' to aid future planning. For instance, you could multiply your expected time on tasks by 1.5 to help buffer against the planning fallacy.

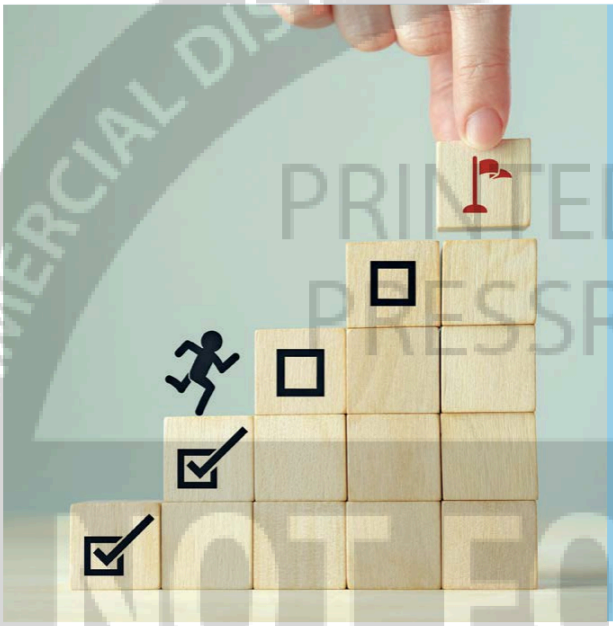
3 FOCUS ON MASTERY

Self-concordant goals and tasks feel easier, and their underlying tasks may be less subject to forgetting. Tedious but necessary goals (such as doing the dishes or filling out forms) are less intrinsically motivating. This means planning, reminders and support become more important to goal progress.

4 PLAN FOR DERAILMENTS

People vary in their ability to plan and might forget to take a goal directed action at an appropriate time (this could be one reason the

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THE TIME WE ESTIMATE THAT'S NEEDED TO COMPLETE A TASK OR GOAL IS OFTEN FAR FROM ACCURATE

average Australian streams 27 hours of video each week). Implementation intentions bring our attention back towards our goals by linking them to an environmental marker. These simple 'if-then' plans are shown to help overcome issues with self-regulation. Such a statement might be "if I see the 'next episode' icon appear, I will get up and turn off the TV so I can read a chapter of my textbook".

With time being frustratingly finite, it is inevitable we will run out of time to do all of the things on our to-do list. Finding an approach that works for us will take time and effort. But it's probably a worthy goal in itself. R

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Popularity Of Pet Prams Soars

The nation with the world's lowest birthrate has been rocked by soaring sales of dog strollers. Last year, dog prams outpaced the sale of actual baby carriages according to a leading South Korean online retailer. Pet ownership and spending on their beloved pooches has been on the rise in South Korea as people choose pets over having children.

NEWS WEEK