

A goal without a process can get in the way of progress.



# Keeping Your Goals from Getting in the Way of Personal Growth

By Adam M. Moore

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist

I love all things Italian. I have always dreamed of wandering the streets of Rome, speaking to the people there as if I had been born in Italy myself. A few years ago, I saw a language-learning program for Italian on sale, and I immediately purchased it. I told everyone on social media my goal to learn Italian that year and make a trip to Italy to practice my new language skills.

I had two interesting experiences that taught me something important about how goals can get in the way of progress. First, publicly announcing my goal convinced my mind that I was making more progress than I really was. Although I hadn't yet learned even one word of Italian, I got a lot of pats on the back but no accountability.<sup>1</sup> Second, after spending an hour or two trying to learn Italian, I looked at the massive gap between where I was and where I wanted to be (full fluency in Italian) and felt overwhelmed and disheartened.

Between the false progress I thought I was making and my frustration with my lack of progress, I never got back into the learning program again. It's now collecting dust somewhere in my basement. I still haven't visited Italy, either.

## Goals and Growth

Plenty of evidence demonstrates that properly implemented goal setting can help us get things done.<sup>2</sup> But in this case, my goal to learn Italian wasn't enough, because growth doesn't happen just because I have a goal; it comes from making the effort to achieve it (see Mosiah 4:27).

How we measure progress can determine whether or not we are successful. Maybe you set goals for daily scripture study or increased one-on-one time with family members. These goals are easy to define, easy to measure, and you can see immediate progress with many of them.

But what about goals that involve *becoming*? What if your goals are focused on a change, an identity, or a character trait you want to achieve? These might include goals to be more patient, recover from compulsive

pornography use, or become more like Jesus Christ.

This is where things can get complicated, because measuring progress can be particularly challenging when it comes to goals that are about personal growth. They are harder to measure because they may be achieved only over a lifetime of work and will likely require continued personal effort even into the next phase of our immortal journey.

### The Binary Dilemma

Perhaps the biggest problem here is that sometimes measuring the success of our goals can get us into a *binary* mind-set. Binary means off/on, yes/no, pass/fail. It's one or the other. You've either achieved your goal or you haven't.

#### **Problem 1: Too Much Failure**

One problem with this binary mind-set is that we often feel we have

succeeded only after we have fully obtained what we're seeking. It's easy for us to believe that until we have entirely completed our goal, or arrived fully, we are failing. This is especially true with goals of *becoming*, because we may never experience the feeling of complete success in our mortal lifetime—which could easily leave us feeling like a failure every single day of our lives.

I think that most of us have run into this aspect of what I call the *binary dilemma* in our quest to achieve our divine potential. It's just the kind of tool the adversary can use to keep us stuck or feeling hopeless. If we feel like we're failing every day, it's often not long before we quit trying.

#### **Problem 2: Too Much Success**

There's another way the binary dilemma can keep us from doing the necessary work on our journey of

becoming. With the earlier problem, we gave up because we couldn't see success; the problem here is seeing too much success or false success. Let me show you how this happens.

I'm a family therapist and have focused most of my career on helping people who are struggling to recover from compulsive pornography use. People set goals all the time about stopping the behavior. It seems like a reasonable thing to do—promise to stop doing something that is causing harm to ourselves and others. But I have repeatedly seen people fail to experience the progress they expected when they set this goal.

Imagine being the person promising to never view pornography again. The moment we set the goal and share it with another person, we immediately feel a sense of relief. We feel optimistic that perhaps this really was our last time indulging. In fact, since our goal is binary—either don't look at pornography (pass) or look at it (fail)—we are either passing or failing at any given moment.

Here we see the opposite but equally problematic side of the binary dilemma. From the very moment we set this binary goal, we feel successful because we're not currently viewing pornography right then. And in fact, we will feel successful every moment afterward, all the way right up until the second we turn back to pornography again.

The reason that falling into the binary dilemma is such a problem is that unless we are doing the emotional, spiritual, mental, or relational work required to heal or change, we're experiencing only



the illusion of success. We're not really doing any of the work required to progress toward our goal. Then, when we realize we have failed, we're faced with the temptation to give up.

We can apply this to any of the *becoming* goals mentioned earlier. If our goal is to be a patient parent, we will feel successful up until the point that we act impatiently. We'll believe we've become a patience champion. But without the work required to make real progress, when our patience is tested, we suddenly realize we are not acting the way we wanted, and we may feel like a failure.

### A Better Way of Becoming

In both cases—resigning yourself to failure the moment you make one mistake or feeling like you've changed without real effort—the goal itself is actually getting in the way of progress, either because the distance to your destination is overwhelming or because feeling like you've already reached the destination is keeping you from doing any of the work necessary to actually change. In both situations, the goal has become demotivating. Let me be clear. I'm not saying don't set goals. But I am suggesting a more effective way to engage in your journey of becoming.

Rather than focusing solely on the outcome of the goal, put your energy into the process of becoming. In a process, every moment is

**Rather than focusing solely on the outcome of the goal, put your energy into the process of becoming.**

important. You can enjoy feelings of small daily successes. You can learn from setbacks, rather than treating them as signs of failure. In a process of becoming, you can find joy in each moment—grateful for the opportunity to be a work in progress. You trust that as long as you are *working the process*, which is an essential part of exercising faith in the Lord, reaching your goal will be the natural outcome.

After my wife and I were married, we spent our way into some credit card debt. We had not yet honed our financial skills. The debt loomed over us for over a decade after our first year of marriage. It was daunting to look at the balance on the statements each month. Staring at that amount would sometimes plunge me into shame about my financial choices, and I would start to lose hope that I could ever escape the burden of the debt.

Rather than panic or give up, however, my wife and I decided to put together a process that worked for us. We worked to be cautious with our spending; we made at least the minimum payment each month, and we were regularly accountable to each other to avoid getting into more debt. Like I mentioned, it took us more than 10 years to pay off that debt. But we paid it off through our consistent daily efforts at working the process and being financially wise. For us, a goal without a process would have just been a wish or a dream.

We all have goals of becoming. We know where we want to be, even if we struggle to get there. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said, "Every one of us aspires to a more Christlike life than we often succeed in living."<sup>3</sup> If we will focus on the process of reaching our goals rather than how close or how far we are from where we want to be, we can trust that we are making progress, even if much of our change and growth is only visible in hindsight. ■

#### NOTES

1. Researchers have found that announcing goals to others can give you a false sense of progress and decrease your motivation to complete your goals. See Peter M. Gollwitzer, Paschal Sheeran, Verena Michalski, and Andrea E. Seifert, "When Intentions Go Public: Does Social Reality Widen the Intention-Behavior Gap?" *Psychological Science*, vol. 20, no. 5 (May 2009), 612–18, [psych.nyu.edu/gollwitzer/09\\_Gollwitzer\\_Sheeran\\_Seifert\\_Michalski\\_When\\_Intentions\\_.pdf](http://psych.nyu.edu/gollwitzer/09_Gollwitzer_Sheeran_Seifert_Michalski_When_Intentions_.pdf).
2. See Peter M. Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran, "Implementation Intentions and Goal Achievement: A Meta-analysis of Effects and Processes," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 38 (2006), 69–119, [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0065260106380021](http://sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0065260106380021).
3. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually," *Ensign*, Nov. 2017, 42.



**3** When you notice yourself comparing where you are to where you want to be, focus on this one question: "What single, small decision can I make right now to move forward in my process of becoming?"

**2** Bring some people into your life who can hold you accountable each day for participating in your process of becoming.

**1** If you know the kind of person you want to be, pray about a few daily behaviors you can engage in that will help you move in that direction.

**4** Remember that "by small and simple things are great things brought to pass" (Alma 37:6).

**5** When you slip up, **don't give up.** Evaluate what led to the mistake and whether your process should be modified to help prevent it from happening in the future.

**6** Keep moving forward with faith in the Lord.

## A Process for Progress

In your journey to become, here are some tips that can help you continue to progress and avoid getting caught in the binary dilemma.