Dr. Gregory Madden Finds Success in Self-Improvement Lab for Undergrad Students

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Despite the many challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Gregory Madden found success in his online Psychology 1410 course. PSY 1410 is a lab course taken concurrently with PSY 1400, an introductory behavior analysis course. 1410 provides students with an opportunity to put the information they are learning about behavior analysis to use in a real-life setting.

This year’s PSY 1410 course focused on a self-improvement project. Students were initially asked to identify and precisely define a personal behavior they were interested in changing. They were encouraged to choose something that they deeply valued and believed would result in a better version of themselves if they did it every day. They then measured how often that behavior occurred before the start of the project, and kept track of how much it occurred over the semester. Some students elected to change a behavior like eating junk food, so they set a goal to eat less of it over the semester. Other students focused on a behavior they would like to do more, such as exercise.

Once the baseline of the target behavior was established (e.g., taking 3,500 steps per day), students used a mathematical formula to set daily goals for themselves that were both achievable and modestly challenging. If students were successful in improving their behavior for a few days, the formula automatically adjusted the daily goals. This kept the goals moderately challenging while gradually leading to better daily habits over time. Students didn’t use any artificial reinforcers such as a gift card or pizza party for success. Instead, meeting their daily goal and seeing a valued behavior improve was an intrinsic reinforcer, helping students change their identity to one aligned with their personal values.

Madden encouraged students, but did not require them to share their performance data in their course’s online discussion board. “Meta-analysis data shows that sharing with others your self-improvement goals, and how you are doing in meeting those goals, can improve our chances of success,” said Madden. Because he wanted to improve his own daily exercising behavior, which had devolved in the time of COVID, Madden joined his students in this self-improvement project and shared his daily step-count data on the discussion board.

Following the advice provided to PSY 1410 students, Madden started slowly. He was more interested in getting into the habit of running each day than he was in posting big numbers. As the goal-setting formula gradually increased the distance he was to run, by day 19 he completed his first mile. “Around this time, I noticed that whether or not I would run was no longer a question,” Madden said. “It was just what I did, automatically, after I finished my coffee. I had formed a new habit.” A few weeks later, Madden switched from running to speed-walking due to knee pain, but was still able to gradually increase his distance to five miles per day, which is where he has settled for the long term.

“The materials provided to students are designed to encourage the development of daily habits that will last long after the self-improvement project ends,” said Madden. “Not every student succeeds in these projects, but many of them do. I think the project gives them the building blocks of a meaningful skill—helping themselves or helping others to develop good habits that make them feel better about themselves. We could all use a bit more of that.”