

1 **SETTING HIGHER GOALS MAY MAKE ATHLETES FEEL WORSE: THE GOAL**
2 **SETTING PARADOX AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS.**

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23 **Goal Setting**

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25 Goal setting has evolved over many decades to become a dominant feature in many different
26 rehabilitation areas, including sport (1). Goal setting is widely used and has several purported
27 benefits such as increasing motivation, improving athletic performance and enhancing function
28 (1); therefore it is no surprise that goal setting practices are viewed as essential and
29 indispensable components of rehabilitation (2). In addition, for some professions involved in
30 sport, such as athletic therapists, physiotherapists, goal setting is a professional requirement set
31 by their regulatory body. For example the Health and Care Professions Council states that
32 'physiotherapists need to set and understand the need to agree goals' (3). Despite this, many
33 debates surrounding a lack of consensus on the best goal setting approach remains to be a
34 prominent concern in current empirical literature (4).

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36 A number of goal setting strategies are used in sport. The most commonly used are specific,
37 measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) goals and process, performance and
38 outcome based goals (5). From a sporting perspective, scientific literature suggests that goals
39 are likely to be more successful if the goals are made difficult to achieve (5). Controversially,
40 research conducted predominately in sport, has reported that when a difficult or higher level
41 goal is achieved the athlete feels less satisfied than when an easier goal is achieved (6). This
42 phenomenon, which appears to defy logic, is known as the 'goal setting paradox'. One potential
43 explanation for this, is that once the higher goal has been attained, changes in the autonomic
44 system may cause a feeling of deflation (7). Autonomic changes such as to include reduction
45 in brain signalling activity, decreased systolic and diastolic pressure and a reduced heart rate
46 are associated with increased negative mood state in athletes (6).

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48 The goal setting paradox is not a new phenomenon, in fact, empirical evidence suggests that
49 this paradox is and has been a dominant facet of many areas of work, including sport especially
50 where negotiation between the athlete and therapist is involved (8). Therefore, the goal setting
51 paradox should encourage professionals who work in sport to question their goal setting
52 approaches when setting higher goals with their athletes. Should the athlete and their coach/
53 therapist set higher goals but face the possibility of the athlete feeling worse? or should they
54 set lower, more achievable goals could result in the athlete feeling better? Alternatively, should
55 they set goals at all? Unquestionably professionals working with athletes have a duty of care
56 to preserve and optimise the athlete's sense of well-being? What would professionals do if
57 difficult goals that are set are not achieved at all? The literature exploring the goal setting
58 paradox only appears to describe these negative feelings immediately after a difficult goal has
59 been achieved; whereas the longer term psychological effects of achieving a higher goal have
60 not been investigated. Future research exploring this area may provide valuable insight into
61 whether the goal setting paradox only causes a short term negative effect on the athlete's mood
62 state.

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64 One approach that has been used to reduce athletes from feeling subjectively worse following
65 goal attainment is mindfulness. Mindfulness may have dual benefits for both the athlete and
66 therapist/coach. Mindfulness may enable the therapist/coach to become mindful of athletes
67 emotions who achieve high goals and therefore may make those emotions less noticeable or
68 pass quickly (9). In addition, mindfulness can provide feedback about what may work for an
69 athlete to help improve their well-being (9). Athletes who engage in mindfulness are more
70 likely to detach from stressors, subsequently giving the athlete a greater task focus (10).
71 Ensuring that the athlete is always at the forefront of any goal setting or negotiation strategies

72 should minimise any conflict or dilemmas as the athlete is in a position of control over his/ her
73 treatment/ training choices (2).

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75 We have highlighted that the goal setting paradox still appears to be evident within the sporting
76 environment. A growing body of research suggests that incorporating mindfulness is one
77 potential way of minimising the negative psychological impact of setting high goals. This
78 commentary clearly calls for future research exploring the goal setting paradox amongst the
79 long-term psychological implications of setting high goals or whether its effects are only
80 transitory or long-lasting.

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