

coupled with the goal of trying to prove yourself and validate your worth. To find out, we asked a group of just under a hundred undergraduates to fill out a diary every day for three weeks. In it, we asked them to tell us about the worst thing that happened to them each day, how they were feeling about it, and what, if anything, they did in response. We also asked them to check off from a list of daily activities anything they had done that day, including studying, hanging out with friends, and doing household chores, such as washing dishes or laundry.

Before beginning the study, the students filled out a questionnaire that measured whether they were focused mostly on achieving be-good performance goals (“I feel as though my basic worth, competence, and likability are ‘on the line’ in many situations I find myself in”) or get-better mastery goals (“As I see it, the rewards of personal growth and learning something new outweigh the disappointment of failure or rejection”).

We weren’t at all surprised to find that those students who spent most of their time trying to be good were more likely to experience depression than those who were more focused on getting better. Nor was it surprising that the worse the be-gooders felt, the less likely they were to do something useful about it. Feeling bad made them less likely to try to take any action to try to solve the problem. Feeling bad also made them less likely to function well in other aspects of their lives—their dishes lingered in the sink, their dirty laundry piled up, and their textbooks gathered dust.

But we were surprised to find that when they did experience depression, the getting-better group responded very differently to it. The worse they felt, the *more* likely they were to get up and do something about it. If the problem was something they could fix, they took action. If the source of their depression was something out of their own control, they tried to see the silver lining and grow from the experience. And here’s what’s really remarkable: the more depressed getting-better people get, the *more* likely they are to keep up with their other goals—the sadder they felt, the quicker they were to tackle the laundry pile and crack those books. So when you are pursuing get-better goals, taking a poor performance “to heart” is actually good for you. Feeling bad seems to fuel the fire, making you that much more motivated to achieve success.

If you focus on growth instead of validation, on making progress instead of proving yourself, you are less likely to get depressed because you won’t see setbacks and failures as reflecting your own self-worth. And you are less likely to *stay* depressed, because feeling bad makes you want to work harder and keep striving. You get up off the couch, dust off the potato chip crumbs, and get busy getting better.<sup>9</sup>

It may seem incredible to you that shifting the focus of your goals from being good to getting better can so dramatically affect your life. Think of it this way: goals are like lenses in a pair of glasses. The goals you pursue determine not only what you see but how you see it—the things you notice and how you interpret what happens to you. Failures become feedback on how to improve. Obstacles become surmountable. Feeling bad propels you *off* the couch. Change your goal and you change your glasses—your world becomes a very different place.

## What You Can Do

- **Be good or get better?** In this chapter, we focused on the difference between goals that are about proving yourself (*being good*) and goals that are about *improving* yourself (*getting better*). At

work, in school, in your relationships—do you see what you are doing as trying to become the best, or showing everyone (including yourself) that you already are?

- **Be good to perform well.** Wanting to *be good* is very motivating and can lead to excellent performance, provided that things don't get too difficult. Unfortunately, when the road gets rocky, people who are focused on proving themselves tend to conclude that they don't have what it takes—and give up *way* too soon.
- **Get better to improve performance.** When we focus on *getting better*, we take difficulty in stride—using our experiences to fuel our improvement. People who pursue growth often turn in the best performances because they are far more resilient in the face of challenges.
- **Get better to enjoy the ride.** When your goal is to get better rather than to be good, you tend to enjoy what you're doing more and find it more interesting. In other words, you appreciate the journey as much as the destination. You also engage in deeper, more meaningful processing of information and better planning for the future. You are even more likely to ask for help when you need it, and more likely to truly benefit from it.
- **Get better to fight depression.** People whose goals are more about self-growth than they are about self-validation deal with depression and anxiety in more productive ways. Feeling bad makes them get up and take action to solve their problems, rather than just lie around and feel sorry for themselves. Not surprisingly, their depressions tend to be both milder and shorter than those of people who are constantly trying to prove they are capable and worthy.
- **Get better to achieve more.** The bottom line is, whenever possible, try to turn your goals from *being good* to *getting better*. Rather than lament all the ways in which your relationships aren't perfect, focus on all the ways in which they can be improved. At work, focus on expanding your skills and taking on new challenges rather than impressing everyone with how smart and knowledgeable you are. When your emphasis is on what there is to learn rather than what there is to prove, you will be a lot happier and will achieve a lot more.