

# Avoidance-Oriented Plans Predict Worse Goal Progress

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## BACKGROUND

Approach motivation is directed towards reaching desired end-states, whereas avoidance motivation is directed toward preventing undesired outcomes (e.g., Elliot, Sheldon, & Church, 1997).

Both goals and plans can be described as approach and/or avoidant. For example, an approach-oriented health goal could be to "exercise more" while an avoidance-oriented goal could be to "avoid smoking." Approach plans involve actively taking action to move towards one's goal while avoidance plans help people not do certain things in order to reach their goal.

**We tested the hypothesis that approach-oriented goals and plans are positively associated with goal attainment, whereas avoidance-oriented goals and plans are negatively associated with goal attainment.**

## METHOD

Our cross-sectional study included  $N = 455$  participants (56.3% male;  $Age = 39.5$  years) who completed a brief survey about their physical health goals and what they planned to do to achieve their goal(s).

### Approach vs. Avoidance Goal and Plan Orientation

Participants were instructed to categorize their goal(s) into more specific types. They could choose between: "Physical activity" (42.7%), "Healthy eating" (38.0%), "Sleep" (13.6%), "Smoking/drinking" (4.7%) or "Other (please describe) [textbox]" (1.0%).

- Goals and plans were coded as **approach** if they contained an **approach-oriented statement** and a **"not approach"** if they did not.
- Goals and plans were also coded as **avoidance** if they contained an **"avoidance-oriented" statement** and **"not avoidance"** if they did not.

### Subjective Goal Progress

"I have made a lot of progress on this goal"  
 "I feel like I'm on track with my goal plan"  
 "I put in a lot of effort into achieving this goal"

7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

## RESULTS

### APPROACH GOAL

		YES	NO
AVOIDANCE GOAL	YES	"I want to eat less junk food, sugar in particular. I want to get at least 7 hours of sleep a night. I want to workout at least 3 days a week, and walk outside everyday."	"To cut back on snacks, sweets and really just the stuff I eat out of boredom."
	NO	"I am working towards exercising for at least an hour twice a week, towards remaining in decent shape and building muscle mass."	"Good health and eat"  *Responses coded as "neither" excluded from analyses

### APPROACH PLAN

		YES	NO
AVOIDANCE PLAN	YES	"I plan to decrease portion sizes at meal time, cut out snacking between meals and start walking and exercising daily."	"Stop buying foods that tempt me when I'm at the grocery store."
	NO	"I eat fish, veggies, fruits, nuts. I workout 5 days per week"	"Every day I force myself to do it"  *Responses coded as "neither" excluded from analyses

### Goal Coding\*\*

- Approach: 91.9%
- Avoidance: 23.1%

### Plan Coding\*\*

- Approach: 92.35%
- Avoidance: 29.0%

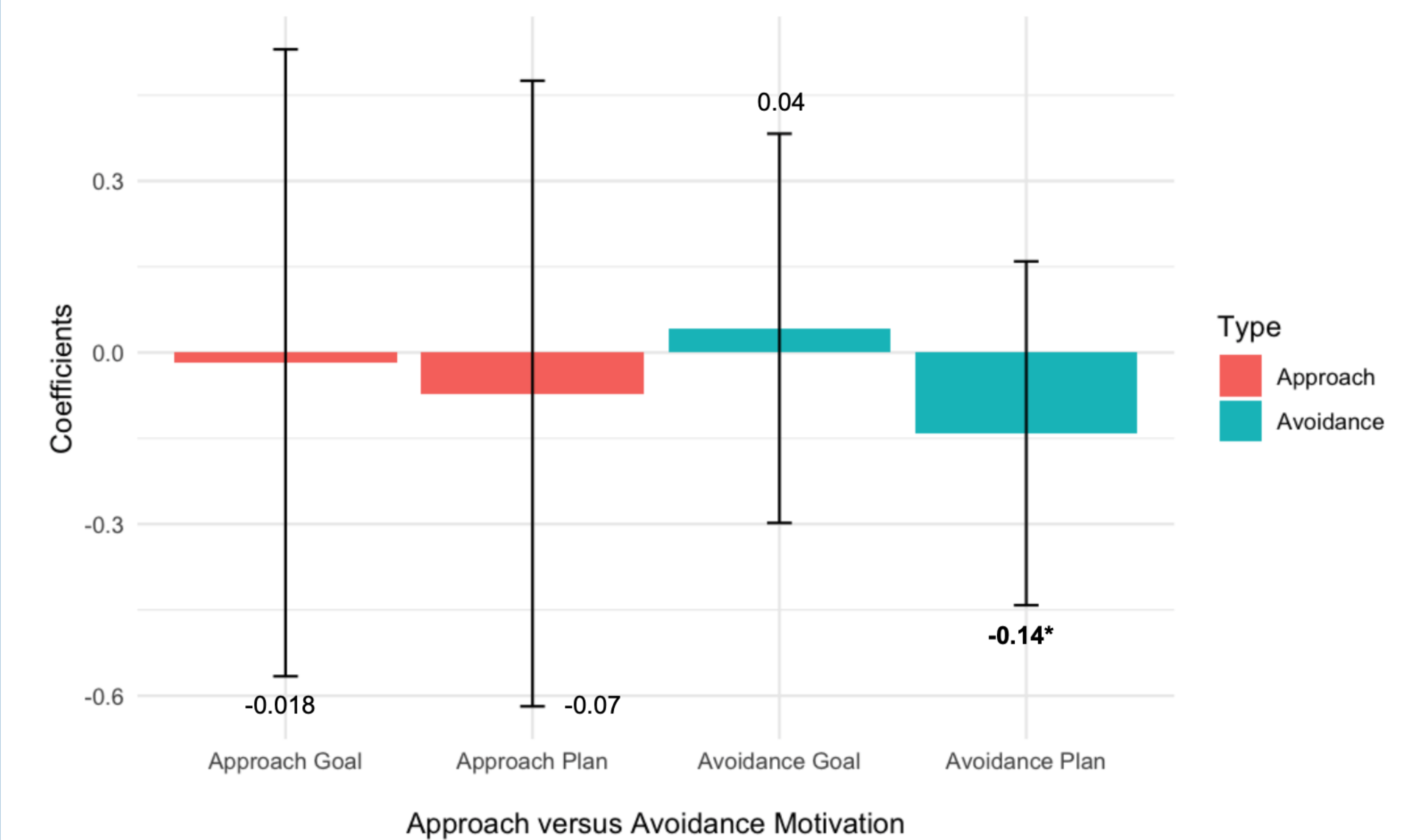
\*\*Percents are greater than 100 when combined because some goal and plans were coded as both approach and avoidance

### Interaction effect between approach and avoidance goals and plans on goal progress

A two-Way ANOVA was conducted to assess the interaction between approach and avoidant goals and plans on goal progress.

No significant interaction was found between the effects of approach and avoidance goals or approach and avoidance plans on goal progress.

### Avoidance plans negatively predicts goal progress



Approach goals, avoidance goals and approach plans were **not** found to significantly predict goal progress. ( $b_{app} = -0.018, p = 0.76$ ;  $b_{avoid} = 0.04, p = 0.46$ ;  $b_{app1} = -0.07, p = 0.21$ )

**Avoidance plans were found to negatively predict goal progress ( $b_{avoidpl} = -0.14, p < 0.01$ )**

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the valence of people's goals does not seem to have a significant effect on goal progress. Goal plans, by contrast, may be a better predictor of one's goal progress and eventual goal attainment. Specifically, having an avoidant-oriented goal plan was found to negatively predict goal progress. This suggests that thinking about *not* doing certain behaviors may have a detrimental effect on one's ability to reach their physical health goals.

Future research could examine the effects of physical health goal interventions on the goal plan level.

## REFERENCES

Elliot, A. J., Sheldon, K. M., & Church, M. A. (1997). Avoidance personal goals and subjective well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23(9), 915-927.