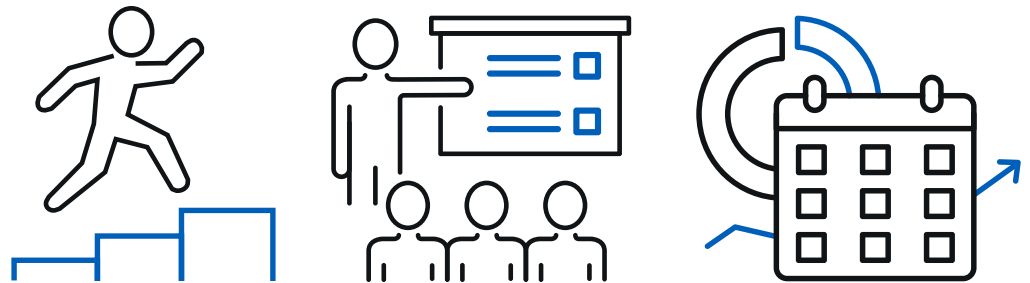


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## Using The Science About Self-Regulation To Improve Economic Outcomes For TANF Families

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Administrators and staff of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs are continually looking for new strategies to help their participants achieve economic independence. Many TANF employment programs focus on rapid job placement with some access to short-term education, training, and work-like activities, such as work experience, subsidized employment, and on-the-job training. These programs typically offer child care assistance and some work supports as well.

Unfortunately, studies have shown that these approaches have produced only limited positive employment outcomes for program participants, whereas others have shown no impact at all.<sup>1,2</sup> As a result, in recent years TANF staff have explored new strategies aimed at improving these outcomes.

New research focused on the role of self-regulation could help. Self-regulation refers to a core set of skills and personality factors that allow people to intentionally control thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Table 1).<sup>4,5</sup> It is what enables all of us to set goals, make plans, solve problems, monitor our actions, and control our impulses.<sup>6</sup> These skills are essential for managing work and family activities such as planning morning and after school routines, completing job-related tasks, and engaging in quality parent and child interactions. Successful execution of these skills can lead to better outcomes for children and families.

**Table 1. Examples of self-regulation skills**

Skill category	Skill	Definition
Personality factors	Motivation Grit Self-efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The desire to start and finish tasks</li> <li>• The ability to persevere to attain long-term goals</li> <li>• The belief we have in our ability to perform at a high level</li> </ul>
Emotional skills	Emotion understanding Emotion regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ability to understand emotions in ourselves and others</li> <li>• The ability to alter the intensity of the emotion being experienced and the behaviors that go along with that emotion</li> </ul>
Cognitive skills	Executive function  Selective attention  Metacognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A set of cognitive skills that helps us regulate and control our actions, particularly intentional action, goal setting, and goal pursuit</li> <li>• The ability to attend to one particular aspect of a task in the face of other thoughts, information, and actions</li> <li>• A skill we use to observe and evaluate how we think, which is sometimes referred to as ‘thinking about thinking’</li> </ul>

Source: Cavadel et al. (2017).

In recent years, researchers have explored how the conditions associated with poverty can hinder the development of self-regulation skills. In particular, chronic exposure to high levels of stress can have adverse consequences on self-regulation skills.<sup>7</sup> Early childhood exposure to chronic, severe stress has been shown to inhibit development of critical executive function skills.<sup>8</sup> The effects of this underdevelopment may continue into adulthood. Exposure to chronic stress can even inhibit individuals’ ability to access and use the self-regulation skills they already have.<sup>9</sup>

The good news is that research also suggests that self-regulation skills can improve throughout a person’s lifetime. Because the brain is still malleable during adulthood, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood (ages 15–25), self-regulation skills

can be improved later in life by deliberately practicing and using them.<sup>10</sup> This paper, developed as part of the Goal-Oriented Adult Learning in Self-Sufficiency (GOALS) project, articulates a vision for TANF programs that is informed by the science about self-regulation and goal achievement. It emphasizes three principles for helping TANF recipients use self-regulation strategies to improve economic outcomes for children and families: (1) reduce sources of stress, (2) strengthen core life skills (for example, planning, monitoring, and exercising self-control)<sup>11</sup>, and (3) support responsive relationships.<sup>12</sup>

## REDUCE EXTERNAL SOURCES OF STRESS

People living in poverty experience intense stress, which depletes the energy they need to engage with the world and build and use self-regulation skills.<sup>13</sup> They may live in low-income neighborhoods that are often plagued by crime, limited job opportunities, and a lack of basic institutions, such as grocery stores, banks, and quality child care centers. They often face challenges getting to and from a child care center and work. They may face obstacles to making emergency arrangements for a sick child or a child who is at home due to a school closure. They navigate complex government agencies to access basic benefits—such as cash assistance, public housing, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medicaid. In addition to a lack of financial resources, many have few family or social supports. The cumulative burden of these stressors weighs heavily on low-income parents and may detract from the use and development of self-regulation skills.<sup>14</sup>

Although TANF staff have limited control over many of these external stressors, they can make changes to the program environment that might help participants to develop their self-regulation skills for work and parenting. They might also provide support to staff and clients for managing their stress. TANF programs can reduce or manage stress in the following ways:

- **Provide services in places that are convenient to participants.** Getting to appointments can be difficult for low-income families, particularly those who do not have a reliable car. Making it easier for participants to access services can free up energy and time for work and parenting activities. For example, the MOMS Partnership in New Haven, Connecticut, provides stress-management groups for low-income mothers with depression symptoms in convenient locations such as community centers, supermarkets, and schools. These MOMS women, many of whom receive TANF, have a 78 percent rate of program completion—compared with traditional groups that work with similar populations but only see, roughly, one-third of participants finish their programs.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, TANF agencies may consider providing services in community centers or other locations near where low-income families live.
- **Streamline business processes, forms, and reporting activities.** Complicated business processes and forms can increase the effort required for both direct-service staff and participants. Federal law requires reporting various activities, but state and local governments often layer on even more reporting requirements, increasing

the burden on staff and participants to document their activities. Simplifying these requirements using behavioral science techniques (for example, simplifying forms, using appointment reminders) would free up time and energy for staff and participants to engage with one another more meaningfully and more frequently to build participants' self-regulation skills.<sup>16</sup>

### Ramsey County's Lifelong Learning Initiative

With support from Mathematica Policy Research, Ramsey County (St. Paul, Minnesota) recently completed a workload analysis of the Lifelong Learning Initiative (LLI) program for TANF participants. This analysis looked at the daily required tasks, time staff spent on each task, and the process for completing these activities. The results included concrete recommendations grounded in behavioral-economics theory that simplify the program environment: (1) shorten and simplify participants' orientation and paperwork; (2) revise case-noting practices for case managers; and (3) map out the steps participants need to take to complete routine activities that case managers are required to repeatedly describe to each participant. These adjustments can free up time for more frequent interactions between staff and LLI program participants.

- **Hold participants accountable for requirements that reflect their current abilities and circumstances, adjusting the requirements as their situations improve.**

Participants are more likely to engage in program activities and make progress if they are working on goals that are achievable and meaningful to them.<sup>17</sup> Prescribed hours and activities may set participants up to fail by engaging them in activities that are beyond their current capacity or by enforcing participation in activities that are of no value to them. One way to reduce the stress that interferes with self-regulation within the TANF regulatory environment is to allow flexible hours for work and activities for participants—while still emphasizing goal progress and working toward full participation in federally defined activities.

- **Use technology to increase staff and participant interactions and to improve efficiency.** Technology creates new opportunities to incorporate goal-directed behaviors and to streamline the program environment, which, in turn, reduces staff and client stress. For example, Larimer County (Fort Collins, Colorado) is using a two-way interfacing web-based tool, called My Journey to Success, which allows participants to set and track goals, learn about agency resources, and report their work participation hours and activities online.<sup>18</sup> An added benefit is that the technology has the potential to free up staff energy and time and increase the number of staff and participant interactions.

- **Incorporate stress management techniques such as mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) into program activities.** Techniques such as mindfulness and CBT can be used to reduce stress by reframing thought patterns. For example, mindfulness interventions teach people to purposefully direct attention to what is happening in the moment and to monitor their feelings about what is happening in a non-judgmental way, rather than to default to automatic or negative thoughts and behaviors.<sup>19</sup> CBT can also be used individually or in groups to help people change

their thought patterns, beliefs, or attitudes in order to change their behavior and emotion, thereby reducing their stress.<sup>20</sup> Adopting stress management techniques might be beneficial for both staff and participants.

## STRENGTHEN CORE LIFE SKILLS

To help participants achieve economic independence, TANF programs may find it useful to invest in activities that build self-regulation skills in areas such as planning, emotional regulation, and sustained attention; over time, such skills may improve work and parenting outcomes. Skills-building strategies include creating a clear, replicable, habit-forming process for goal achievement; having frequent and purposeful interactions with program staff and peers; and finding opportunities to practice skills in the environment where they will be used.

### Larimer County's My Journey to Success

My Journey to Success (MJTS) is a web-based, interactive tool designed to save time and increase interactions between program staff and participants. MJTS is dual-facing: (1) participants enter information into the system and can interact with staff through file-sharing and messaging, and (2) coaches can track participants' entries in real time as well as respond to and send messages. Participants can access MJTS and all of its features from a computer or smart phone.

MJTS allows participants to electronically record and submit time sheets for their TANF-required hours of work. Staff can also review, modify, and approve the user-submitted reports. Typically, this kind of data-entry task can take up more than half of a case manager's time, but now it can be completed in a few minutes. Participants with internet access can also avoid the time and hassle of traveling to and from the TANF office to submit their time sheets.

TANF programs can strengthen core life skills by implementing these strategies:

- **Adopt a habit-forming process to work towards goals, informed by behavioral science, to build self-regulation skills.** A goal-achievement process is a deliberate effort to realize an outcome that would not otherwise occur. It involves (1) setting a meaningful goal, (2) creating a detailed plan with manageable steps, (3) taking action, and (4) reviewing/revising the goal and the plan based on the outcome (Box 1).<sup>21</sup> The steps in this process, when executed routinely and properly, build self-regulation skills such as memory, planning and prioritization, time management, and sustained attention.<sup>22</sup> Infusing goal-achievement strategies throughout the TANF service-delivery process can help create habit-forming routines.

**Box 1. A habit-forming process to work toward goals informed by behavioral science**

1. **Identify a meaningful goal that is personally motivating.** Research shows that when people identify their own goals, they are motivated by feelings of personal satisfaction and accomplishment, and the goal is more likely to be achieved.<sup>23</sup> Goals that are meaningful and motivating, challenging yet feasible, and specific have the greatest chance of being realized.<sup>24</sup> In addition, taking a few moments to visualize the feelings associated with achieving a goal can increase the motivation to take action toward that goal.<sup>25</sup>
2. **Develop a plan that focuses on small, achievable steps.** Research shows that breaking down goals into small, achievable steps helps people commit to their goals and persevere.<sup>26</sup> Simply imagining a desired outcome is insufficient to make a goal achievable; rather, the goal must be paired with an action plan that creates a step-by-step path toward goal achievement.<sup>27</sup> An effective plan must consider potential obstacles to goal achievement and include strategies to overcome them.<sup>28</sup>
3. **Put the plan into action.** Taking action requires self-control and the use of several self-regulation skills. Ultimately, the program participant is the only person who can take action toward his or her goal. Coaching, in which staff support the participant in skill development, plays an important role in this phase of the process. Staff can support participants in executing their plans with behavioral reminders, check-ins, encouragement, and feedback.
4. **Review progress and revise the plan based on what has been learned.** Goal pursuit is a learning process and often involves setbacks and course corrections. Reviewing progress and revising the plan (or the goal) can be a collaboration between staff and participants, one that helps the individual consider what might have gotten in the way and what could be done differently. This reflective exercise leads to new insights that can be applied to an individual's use of the goal-achievement process and, therefore, his or her self-regulation skills.

**Goals should be:**

- Personally meaningful and motivating
- Challenging yet feasible
- Specific
- Visualized

**Planning:**

- Involves small, achievable steps
- Identifies potential obstacles to goal achievement
- Pairs each obstacle with a proactive solution

**Doing:**

- Requires self-control and various executive-function skills
- May be practiced during program-defined work activities, such as a job search or work experience

**Reviewing and Revising:**

- Uses and strengthens key reflective executive function skills
- Benefits from collaboration between staff and participants
- Helps to formalize learning from the goal-achievement process

- **Incorporate skills-building activities during any frequent, regular interactions between program staff and participants as well as during peer-to-peer exchanges.** Some TANF activities take place in groups, particularly among TANF programs that serve large populations. Skills-building activities can be incorporated into program orientation, job-search assistance workshops, and peer-to-peer support groups.
  - **Program orientation.** Orientation makes an important first impression on many participants; it can set the tone for the entire service-delivery process. A positive orientation strategy might include taking just 10 minutes to walk through the goal-achievement process and asking participants to set a goal for the next day or week. Or orientation might mean alerting participants to the available program activities and services that are structured as opportunities to set goals and strengthen skills.
  - **Job-search assistance workshops.** Job-search assistance workshops, a common TANF activity with frequent interactions, offer a structured opportunity to apply the goal-achievement process and routinely practice it in a work-relevant context. Participants can set daily job-search goals at the beginning of each day, act on their

plans throughout the day, and complete the review-and-revise steps as a group at the end of the day.

- *Peer-to-peer support groups.* TANF programs might also consider forming a new group option focused explicitly on setting goals, reviewing progress, and revising plans. Participants could meet weekly for an hour, share their experiences, support one another, and learn from each other while applying the goal-achievement process to their everyday lives. The group environment might enhance participants' commitments to their goals through built-in accountability (in other words, a weekly review of progress toward their goals).<sup>30</sup> These peer-to-peer interactions can also build meaningful, healthy relationships and create social connections as group participants coalesce around the common goal family self-sufficiency.

- **Use federal work activities to build work and core life skills in environments that resemble workplaces.** TANF programs are required by law to ensure that participants meet certain levels of participation in predefined work-related activities as a condition of federal funding. Specified proportions of participants must engage in work-related activities—such as job searches, unsubsidized employment, and work experience—for a set number of hours each week (20 or 30 hours depending on the age of their youngest child) as a condition of receiving cash assistance.<sup>31</sup> Using work-related activities is a meaningful way to build participants' work and core life skills, and it creates an opportunity to practice skills in the environments that resemble workplaces.

Ways these activities may be used:

- *Practice improving specific work and core life skills.* Job-search and job-readiness assistance, job-skills training, and education activities offer suitable environments for practicing the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace and, more generally, in managing everyday life. As participants do these activities, they might become more motivated to set a goal to work on a particular skill of their choosing (such as better time management or emotional regulation). By reframing the activity as a chance to practice a skill in an applied setting, the work-related activity becomes less focused on compliance (simply fulfilling the participation requirement) and more meaningfully centered on a goal-directed pursuit (which still fulfills the requirement).
- *Set goals and create plans for site-based work-related activities.* Employment, on-the-job training, work experience, and community service all typically involve TANF participants working on location alongside others. These types of activities present a chance to focus the goal-achievement process on preparedness for and success at work sites. TANF staff can help participants set goals for what they hope to achieve each day or each week at a work site. For example, daily goals might focus on task productivity which requires self-regulation (such as assembling 25 welcome packets or completing a task on time) or creating meaningful exchanges with their co-workers (such as providing constructive feedback without getting angry). These tasks draw upon and create opportunities to practice self-regulation skills such as executive function, selective attention, and emotional regulation.

## SUPPORT RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The staff-participant relationship is one of the more important aspects of service delivery. This relationship often has a defining influence on participants' ability to navigate a program successfully. Yet, largely because of the federal regulations around participation requirements and the documentation to support them, TANF programs tend to stress compliance with work requirements, an approach that is not always successful in improving outcomes.<sup>32</sup>

### Measuring self-regulation skills and goal-directed behaviors

Besides monitoring the work participation rate, directly measuring improvements in goal-directed behaviors and employment outcomes will help programs determine if the changes made a difference. The Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation has published two briefs on measuring self-regulation skills that may be useful for defining alternative program measures. The briefs are available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/new-perspectives-on-practice-a-guide-to-measuring-self-regulation-and-goal-related-outcomes-in-employment-programs> and <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/measuring-self-regulation-skills-evaluations-employment-programs-low-income-populations-challenges-recommendations>.

Encouraging supportive relationships, where the worker-participant relationship focuses on meaningful goal pursuit, creates an opportunity to model healthy work behaviors and build trust.<sup>33</sup>

- **Create more meaningful exchanges between program staff and program participants by emphasizing meaningful goals and addressing the barriers that are specific to each goal.** A goal-directed approach allows staff to connect with participants about their future, rather than their past. An emphasis on goal achievement reduces the upfront emphasis on assessing all the participant's barriers to employment. Instead, the focus is on identifying a potential internal or external obstacle (or barrier) in relation to a well-defined goal and what might get in the way of achieving that goal.

Meaningful conversations do not necessarily take more time. Instead, they take more awareness and focus. This requires a different skill set on the part of the program staff (Box 2).

Supervisors play a critical role in supporting staff as they create more meaningful exchanges with participants. To change the focus from transactional to meaningful interactions, programs might incorporate goal-directed practices in supervision, training, and professional development.

- **Have more frequent and targeted interactions with participants.** Often, due to high caseloads, participants meet infrequently with program staff; there might be one to three months between meetings. But to help a participant build skills and pursue goals, program staff must have more frequent interactions (whether in person, by phone, or electronically) to provide constructive accountability and meaningful planning sessions.



## **Box 2. Staff skills and behaviors for creating meaningful, goal-directed interactions with participants:**

- Facilitates, rather than directs, a nonjudgmental and focused conversation with the participant
- Asks open-ended questions, uses reflective statements
- Detects and addresses the participant's ambivalence about change
- Reinforces a participant's ability to make positive changes in their lives, focusing on actions that are within their control
- Sets clear and consistent boundaries with the participant
- Provides clear expectations and appropriately holds the participant accountable
- Helps the participant articulate a goal that is feasible and meaningful to them
- Helps participants break the tasks required to meet the goals into smaller, more feasible steps.
- Helps the participant identify obstacles that might interfere with achieving a goal and solutions for overcoming those obstacles
- Helps the participant assess progress toward goals and helps him or her revise accordingly

However, with more frequent meetings and no changes in their caseloads, staff must also restructure and shorten their interactions with participants so that there are clear objectives for each interaction. For example, rather than meet with a participant once every six weeks for an hour and a half, a staff member could meet with a participant once every two weeks for half an hour. By giving structure and focus to these more frequent meetings, staff and participants can have more targeted discussions about skills-building and progress on near-term goals. Staff can also address obstacles as they arise and provide the necessary support to help participants navigate these complexities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The opportunities for change discussed in this brief—strategies that target self-regulation skills and goal attainment—may help programs devise innovative approaches to helping individuals and families achieve economic independence. Investing in skill building activities, reducing sources of external stress, and creating responsive relationships between staff and participants might improve work and parenting outcomes for low-income families. While the use of self-regulation strategies shows promise, more research is needed to draw definitive conclusions as to their effectiveness.

### **About the Goal-Oriented Adult Learning in Self-Sufficiency (GOALS) project.**

The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families created the GOALS project to explore how emerging insights from psychology, neuroscience, and other behavioral sciences can inform employment programs for adults and better support goal achievement. In 2014, OPRE awarded a contract to Mathematica Policy Research to carry out this work. Products from this project include an in-depth literature synthesis on self-regulation and goal achievement, a series of practice briefs, and a final synthesis report that highlights findings from site visit to five promising programs that focus on improving self-regulation skills and goal-directed behaviors.

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**ENDNOTES**


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