

My name is Eran Magen. I wish to study what it is that makes us able – or, all too frequently, unable – to follow our own decisions. Those decisions may be to exercise every day, never again to raise our voice in anger, to stick to a specific diet, to stop abusing drugs, to do our chores on time, to jump out of bed as soon as the alarm clock rings, etc.

We make decisions constantly, believing that our future behavior will follow from those decisions. Reality, however, proves that when the “moment of truth” comes (the time when we need to act on our decision), we often act in a way that is completely different than how we “decided” to behave before – only to regret it a few minutes, or even seconds later, after we return to the same state of mind we were in when we made the decision initially.

I believe that emotion (and our ability to remember that emotion in the “moment of truth”) plays a key role in our ability to act on our decisions. A vivid recollection of the sadness we felt after hurting a loved one, for example, may inhibit us from saying something hurtful during a current argument. In the same way, remembering the joy of completing a test for which we were well prepared may increase the likelihood of starting to study early for the next one. Forgetting that emotion (or having a new emotion “cover over it”) disconnects us from the decision, making it seem “empty” and insubstantial.

I hope to produce a practical, concrete line of research on this topic. I have spent much of the last year reading on this and related topics and have read relevant work by Mischel (specifically the Hot/Cool model), Gollwitzer, Higgins, Bandura, Gross, Baumeister, Muraven, Slovic, Levine and Richards, among others. I am excited about the prospect of contributing to the growing understanding of this issue.



I completed my BA in Behavioral Science when I was 18 at the Ben-Gurion University in Israel. Shortly after the end of my studies there, I joined the Israeli Army and served for 3.5 years as an Operations Officer in the Gaza Strip, where I coordinated civil matters (human rights, medicine and merchandise shipments, work permits, and more) between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. My position entailed extensive research and implementation of various projects - an element I thoroughly enjoyed and, judging by feedback I received from my superiors and peers, performed well. During this period I also learned to appreciate the value of collaboration and information sharing – I am very much a team player, and strongly believe in the value of diversity and a multitude of opinions.

I moved to the U.S. (New York City) shortly after completing my army service and began working as a Homeless Outreach Specialist in Manhattan. Working daily with homeless clients

spurred my desire to learn more about our ability to act according to our decisions: many of our clients were substance abusers and some were mentally ill, and yet – every once in a while – a determined individual would request assistance, enter treatment and eventually find his way back into society. Of course, for any one such individual, there were hundreds of others who did not manage to complete the recovery process and succumbed to various urges along the way.

What gives a person the strength to decide to “kick” a drug habit – and then follow through on that decision? What would enable us to make a decision (to allocate more regular time to our family, or to stop eating a certain kind of food) and know that we will follow it? How can we **truly become our own masters?**



I am fortunate to be a research assistant in the psychology lab of Professor E. Tory Higgins at Columbia University, where I have been working with Dr. Scott Spiegel on several studies. In one study, we tested the relationship between regulatory focus (prevention/promotion) and political orientation (conservative/liberal), with respect to people’s beliefs about various political issues, which were broadly classified as either social or economic in nature. We believe that conservatives tend to react as promotion-oriented individuals in regard to economic issues - but when the issue is social in nature, they display reaction patterns typical for prevention-oriented people. In contrast, we predict that the exact opposite is true of liberals. We are currently analyzing our initial data and developing follow-up studies to further test our hypotheses.

In another study we examined the possibility that, when choosing between two items, a subject’s feeling of having used the “right” strategy (a prevention-oriented or promotion-oriented strategy, depending on the subject’s chronic tendency) may lead the subject to assign a higher price value to those products. Our findings suggest that when such “regulatory fit” exists, subjects tend to appraise the items in question at approximately 50% higher than when such fit is missing.

I have been working at Professor Higgins’ lab for the past six months. I am grateful for this opportunity to learn about and participate in the active research aspect of Psychology. The process of collecting and analyzing the data, interpreting the findings and designing follow-up experiments is exciting and extremely fulfilling.

University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Social Psychology program is well known, and I would be honored and excited to attend its Ph.D. program. Shah’s work on goals and self-regulation, as well as Harmon-Jones’s work on the regulation of emotion and motivation, is very relevant to my interests. The opportunity to learn from them directly would be invaluable indeed.

Thank you for your time.