

Happy to just muddle along

Do you lack burning ambition? So what, says Hazel Davis, maybe life is better when you don't live according to a plan

What do you want to do next?' asked my friend, Annie, as we sat on my sofa, guzzling chocolate and watching *Girls*. 'Um, shall we start another episode?' I suggested, contentedly. 'No, I mean in life!' she said.

There was a silence. It hadn't occurred to me that there was a next. There I was, with a moderately successful freelance career, two children, several musical instruments that I enjoyed playing in my spare time and a garden. What could possibly be next?

'Career goals, a bigger house, more money,' she pressed... 'Where do you want to be in 10 years' time?'

'Er, I don't know. Still alive?' I replied.

I think about that conversation a lot. Unlike Annie, I have never felt the drive to do better and have more. I work a lot in the business arena and I'm constantly bombarded by lessons – hell, I've even written them – on striving for better things, attaining goals and devising five-year plans.

I have always drifted. After drifting into

academia, I drifted out again before drifting into freelance writing and, well, staying here. A few years ago, an editor colleague of mine suggested that I apply for a senior position at a magazine, a role for which I was mentally and experientially qualified. I was flattered that he saw fit to recommend me but it seemed like such a faff.

My partner has a degree in medieval English and is the cleverest person that I know. When we left university, he got a job at a whole food cooperative, a company he'd wanted to work for since he first heard about it. A few years later, my aspirational uncle asked him what he intended to do next. 'After what?' asked my bemused partner. 'After this job,' countered my uncle. 'This can't be what you want to do with your life.'

That was in 2003 and my partner remains employed by that company. I think it's true to say that he's not hankered after another job.

Of course, drive can be a good thing. Evolution is, after all, a competitive process. We're taught that, as humans, our ambition led us to invent the wheel, walk on the moon, cure >>>

“We’re taught that, as humans, ambition led us to invent the wheel, walk on the moon, cure the deadliest diseases and ascend the highest mountains”

the deadliest diseases and ascend the highest mountains. This type of motivation does not show itself in other species, which don’t achieve just for the sake of it. We’re constantly told, certainly as women, to be more ambitious and to dream big.

Don’t show me the money

However, in his book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (Canongate, £9.99), Daniel Pink argues that human motivation is mostly intrinsic – that it is not dependent on external factors, such as earnings or status – and that the aspects of our innate motivation can be divided into autonomy, mastery and purpose.

Working part-time, my partner has a huge degree of autonomy, he has purpose and he’s confident he’s doing a sometimes-difficult job well.

Working for myself, I think I could argue that I have the same. So, why is it hard to say, ‘I’m happy as I am’?

If we had a bigger house, perhaps it would sit better with certain people – our modest end-of-terrace is hardly on anyone’s bucket list. We don’t save to go travelling the world for the entire summer holiday, something I suspect would impress some of our peers more than, ‘Mm, not sure what we’re doing – working in the garden, I guess, and watching films.’

Don’t get me wrong. I toil hard and I play hard too. Most people I know would say I was always on the go. I never turn down jobs, I frequently write until late into the night and I’m in about a million clubs. I don’t sit still, so it’s not like I can’t be bothered – I just can’t be bothered to have an ambition. But is this type of thinking detrimental in any way?

My friend Annie says she sets goals because they help her define who she wants to be. ‘I set out my values and take actions that feed those values,’ she says, adding that listing achievable goals, such as ‘writing 20,000 words of my novel by March’, is more likely to help them come to fruition than a vague, ‘Maybe I’ll write a novel one day’. She’s not wrong. How many times have I idly wondered whether I might perhaps one day write that film script idea I’ve had kicking around at the back of my mind for years? It’s never going to happen because, well, I would have to make a commitment to do it.

Psychotherapist Hilda Burke is on my side, at least partially. ‘When you live your life as a series of goals, there can be a hollowness to it,’ she says. ‘People achieve their goals quicker than they expect sometimes and there is a sense of “I don’t feel as good as I thought I would about that” – and there is a comedown.’

The target trap

For attaining a goal to feel good, there has to be reflection on the lessons you have learned along the way. ‘Otherwise, there might be no real sense of achievement – you feel the need to instantly replace one ambition with another,’ she says.

Burke suggests that people who are too fixated on goals can struggle with the idea of simply being themselves, and their identity is mixed in with goal attainment. Moreover, she adds,

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‘If you’ve meticulously planned everything in your life, what happens when illness, or a new relationship that needs your attention, gets in the way of your goal?’ How important is that goal in the grand scheme?

Being myself is something I don’t find difficult, nor is being open to change. I have many faults but a fixed mindset isn’t one of them – I once moved to Scotland with a fortnight’s notice and abandoned a PhD halfway through because something else was more pressing. But having a lack of



ambition is not always a good thing – as evidenced by the fact that my film will probably never be produced.

Life in two gears

‘People can feel aimless or like they’re coasting,’ says Burke. ‘They might think they’re not achieving their potential. One of my lecturers once said humans are either in safe mode or growth mode. I think there’s a time for both – it’s about knowing whether to take risks or batten down the hatches and stay as you are.’

‘Sometimes, it can be wonderful and transformative to be working towards big goals,’ says Eve Menezes Cunningham, self-care coach and author of *365 Ways To Feel Better* (Pen & Sword Books, £14.99). ‘If it’s a matter of going with the flow and loving the journey, how wonderful... but if we’re feeling stumped and thwarted, we should

reassess and put plans in place.

‘The more we can appreciate however we are feeling, instead of thinking we should be doing more, or less, the more we can tune into what we genuinely want for ourselves. By connecting with our inner wisdom, instead of being swayed by trends and others’ opinions, we can enjoy life more at every stage and relax into that sense of flow and trust in it all working out.’

Perhaps, in my moseying-along state, I’ve reached an enviable nirvana where I’m not constantly striving for something unattainable. Or perhaps I’m jeopardising my future happiness by refusing to codify my desires. Either way, I think I’m going to check in with myself now and then about what it is that I truly want from life, to ensure my aimless existence is still one I am completely comfortable with.

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Time to freewheel or head to a destination?

Coach Eve Menezes Cunningham says our ambitions are constantly evolving and that’s a positive thing. ‘Recognising that something you once wanted no longer appeals means you’re able to explore new goals, if you want,’ she says.

These are her tips on how to strike the balance between coasting aimlessly and planning yourself into oblivion:

Goal-driven? How do your ambitions make you feel?

- When you think about your goals, what emotions come up? Are you excited and energised, or overwhelmed?
- How does it feel to look at your list of goals or vision board? Connect with your body – how do you feel as you consider each element?
- We have so much wisdom available to us if we pay attention to our bodies. If something you were striving for feels heavy, maybe it’s time to move on.

Are you floating aimlessly?

- Maybe you have not connected with any goals for a while. Would you like to move towards something or are you happy as you are? Do you have a goal? (It does not have to be a lofty one!)
- How does it feel to imagine yourself with your goal realised more easily and enjoyably than you thought possible?
- What are you aware of as you connect with your senses and imagine a new reality? What do you see, hear, say to yourself and feel? What are your strongest emotions and sensations?

Get the balance right

We need to do more than dream to make our goals real but cutting ourselves some slack is important too. If striving is your default, how might you let things gently unfold? If you feel adrift, how might you identify your goals and take action? Experimenting with both styles will give you flexibility in the future.