

Most of the things we want to achieve in our lives require planning and concentration in following the plans. Even the simplest activity of preparing a meal requires gathering the products and following the plan in the form of a recipe. While cooking, we need to use products in a certain way and in a certain order, gradually achieving intermediary goals – boiling pasta, preparing tomato sauce, grating cheese – in order to finally arrive at the ultimate goal of having lasagne for dinner. Pursuing this goal, however, can be impeded, if not completely precluded, when forget one of the intermediary goals – we really don't want a lasagne with undercooked pasta. The present project is concerned how maintain goals in our memory when we are engaged in a complicated, multi-staged task, like cooking, but also like any type of medical procedure or performing take-off and landing of a an airplane.

The chief peril for our memory for goals is an interruption. When we are trying to remember or little details that are necessary for the realization of a goal in the form of lasagne, a call from our mobile operator – even one with an offer of the best tariff possible – can pose a serious problem. Even a momentary distraction from the task of cooking causes the details of goals to slip from our memory. The question that is asked in the present project is whether it matters what exactly we are engaged in when our attention is directed away from the goals of behaviour. Does a call from our mobile operator, requiring a short conversation, is more dangerous for pursuing goals than a momentary distraction that does not require our intervention?

The psychological research on the problem of interruptions that has been conducted to date assumed that the sole factor determining the disruptiveness of interruptions is the time for which our attention is diverted away from our goals. This assumption contrasts, however, with many contemporary theories of memory. These theories describe forgetting – whether of goals or any other material we try to remember either for a very brief duration of couple of seconds or for a longer term – as resulting from attention devoted to different elements in the environment. It is not merely the passage of time that causes forgetting but it is learning of new things, often similar to what we try to remember in the first place. The purpose of the project is to examine how these processes – often referred to as interference – cause forgetting of goals. Hence, the assumption behind the present project is that activities we are engaged when our main task becomes interrupted will to a large extent determine whether we will forget goals that govern our behaviour.