



Consider Yourself

The Courage to Let Go

Amanda Bynes, the actor who played Penny Pingleton in the movie *Hairspray*, has retired from acting at the age of 24. Truthfully, I'm not particularly interested in this revelation, but it did get me thinking about something I read in one of my positive psychology textbooks.

Apparently, in her tweet Amanda explained that "I don't love acting any more so I've stopped doing it". Sounds simple, but I bet her decision wasn't an easy one. After all, she's been acting since she was 7, reportedly earned \$2.5 million in 2007 and was named the fifth highest-paid celebrity under 21 by Forbes.

When we've invested a lot of ourselves in something, it can be very difficult to walk away. We might fear that we're making a mistake. We might worry what other people will think. We might be afraid because we have no clue how the future will unfold. And, culturally, many of us have learned that giving up is a form of failure, and who wants to be a quitter.

According to positive psychologist Robert Biswas-Diener and coach Ben Dean, we can become trapped by our inability to walk away. Instead of letting go of a goal that deep down we no longer want, we work half-heartedly towards it. Then we get caught in a perpetual cycle of wasted effort and lack of progress. A very frustrating place to be.

Psychologists Charles Carver and Mark Scheier suggest that when we find ourselves in this space, rather than giving up effort, we should give up commitment. Letting go of a goal that is no longer serving us isn't failure. Rather, once we free ourselves from a goal we don't really want to pursue, we can redirect energy towards other goals we already have or towards new, more motivating goals.

To be clear, this doesn't mean that we should give up commitment to a goal the moment we notice that we've given up effort. What we do need to do though is to ask ourselves why we've given up effort. Perhaps we truly desire the goal, but it conflicts with another goal and we haven't yet found a way to bring them into alignment. Or perhaps, we have a general goal, but we haven't articulated it clearly enough to keep us motivated and what we need to do is to get more specific. But, if the truth is that we've given up effort because deep down we no longer desire the goal, we need to acknowledge that too and have the courage to let the goal go.