

Let's face it: we've all had the moment of inspiration where our motivation is at an all-time high and taking the steps towards our goal feels like clockwork. But, how long does that motivation last? A week? A day? An hour? We all want to achieve something meaningful in life but some things are easier said than done. That is when we need a plan.

Unfortunately, we are generally not very good at goal setting. While we often have a clear idea of what we want or where we want to go, actually setting clear and effective goals takes a bit more reflection, work, time, and practice. Here is a guide to help you identify and plan your goals in a constructive way. In particular, a way that doesn't rely on us feeling good to take action on our goals!

Let's start with your goal:

So, you have a goal that you want to achieve. What is it? Let's write it down here before we forget. This also will help you to see where you started from and how setting clear and effective goals is useful!

My Goal:

(e.g., "Lose weight", "Find a partner", "Get out of debt", "Start a business", "Spend more time with my family", "Get out of bed in the morning", "Stop being angry", etc.)

Step 1: Work out why the goal is important! (Identify Relevant Values)

You may already know why a particular goal is important (e.g., I need it, it will help my career, it is expected of me, etc.) but setting a goal that is in tune with our values "makes it personal". When we have a goal that is guided by our values, every action we take in the process is helping us to become the person we want to be. This is important as it'll often make the difference when we are feeling lost, powerless or defeated. It also means that it isn't just about reaching the end point, every step along the way is important, rich, and meaningful.

So, ask yourself: What makes this goal important to you? How will achieving this goal help you to be the person you want to be? How will this goal help you to feel fulfilled or satisfied?

Step 2: Let's be SMART about this... (SMART Goals)

SMART goals is an acronym that is used a lot in counselling and coaching. There are different versions of SMART goals, but I've always found this one useful:

Specific: Make the goal precise and identify each action you will take and what each action will require. Some examples are below:

<i>Vague Goals</i>	<i>Specific Goals</i>
"I want to lose weight"	"I will lose 5kgs over the next 2 months by exercising each day for 30 minutes"
"I will save more money"	"I will add \$200 to my savings each month by selling my homemade jam at a market each week"
"Get out of bed in the morning"	"I will shower at 7:15am each morning to get out of bed on time"
"Be more kind to my partner"	"I will take care of the kids each Saturday morning so that my partner can relax"

Meaningful: Make sure that the specific goal matches with the values you identified earlier. Will taking these actions help me be the person I want to be? Is it likely that following these goals and actions will give me a sense of purpose? Do I believe that these actions will be meaningful to me?

Please note: Goals can often become rigid rules if they aren't meaningful to us. Rules can become tiresome or exhausting. They can also lead us to focus on the completion of tasks, at the cost of valuing the experience. We also need to check that the goal is for us as opposed to trying to please others or trying to avoid some pain (e.g., "I want to be kind to my partner as I want to be a better husband/wife" as opposed to "I want to be kind to my partner so that we don't argue anymore")

Adaptive: Is this goal flexible to unexpected events take may occur in my life? Is it dependent on my actions regardless of the actions of others? Is this goal likely to improve my life in a meaningful way?

Realistic: Can my goal be achieved given my current circumstances? There is little value in setting a goal that is not realistic and does not take our health, time commitments, financial circumstances, and personal skills into account.

For example: I may want to spend every Saturday with my children, but this is not realistic if I have work on Saturdays and cannot afford to have the time off due to financial pressures. I may want to lose 5kgs, but this might not be realistic if I am committed to several functions, struggle with alcohol use, and, have recently suffered an injury to my chest.

Time-limited: Set a date or time for when the goal is to be completed or when it is to be reviewed. This will likely depend on whether the goal is short-, medium-, or long-term in nature but try to set as accurate a time limit as you can. Always ensure that you set review dates for medium- or long-term goals to increase adaptability.

See if you can re-write your goal from above that incorporates the SMART goals:

Step 3: What we can expect? (Benefits, Obstacles and Management)

First, let's start by writing down a few of the expected positive outcomes you'd get while completing your goal:

Now, like with anything worth doing, we can expect that there will be some difficulties or challenges that might rain on our parade. It is often very important to not only identify these difficulties, but to also plan in advance for them (e.g., how you might identify them and how you might respond to them as they arise).

What are some difficulties that may stop you from achieving your goals? Please list them here:

Please note: It can be helpful to specify whether difficulties are internal (i.e., thoughts, feelings, sensations, urges, etc.) or external (i.e., lack of time, personal conflict, minimal resources, low support, etc.).

How will you respond to each difficulty? Complete the following for each difficulty:

If difficulties, such as (list relevant difficulties) occur, I will use the following strategies to help: (list skills or actions to manage difficulty).

Step 4: Stick to your guns! (Commitment)

You've done a lot of work for this goal, so let's make a commitment. It is preferable to make this commitment to another person in our life as this makes it more likely that we'll follow through. But, if you are really not willing to do that, then please make the commitment to yourself. Say it aloud so that you hear your commitment, it may sound crazy if you are doing it alone but it helps!

"I commit to (insert values-based SMART goal here)!"

Phew! Time for some TLC.

Now that you've done all this work, let's look back to the original goal. Has the work you've done made the goal more meaningful, richer, and achievable? If so, great! If not, review the steps and ask yourself what might be missing. If you continue to struggle, that is okay. Start regardless of your doubts and while you make progress you can review it with us at Shaw Psychology.

Please treat yourself to something enjoyable after completing all of this goal setting. It is a skill and we get better at it each time. We also want to reinforce our steps to create for a better future for ourselves, so it is a great idea to treat yourself to a short break, a nice tea, or even a quick 10 minute massage!