

Setting SMART Goals

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Clearly defining your goals is one of the most important first steps on your fitness journey. Unfortunately, it's often the one that most people spend very little time on or skip entirely. Author Paul Myer commented, "No one ever accomplishes anything of consequence without a goal." He goes on to say, "Goal setting is the strongest human force for self-motivation. " Having specific, well-crafted goals gives us the context in which to weigh the pros and cons of our decisions and actions. Goals help to strengthen our resolve and focus our efforts to a specific purpose. Without a well-defined purpose, it can be difficult to internalize the consequences of our decisions. However, once we have a purpose that we strongly believe in, we become much more empowered to make the necessary sacrifices to achieve that objective.

When setting goals, most people immediately think of outcome goals such as decreasing weight and inches, increasing muscle, or improving your cardio vascular endurance. These goals are important to have because they represent the desired results of the changes that you will be making. However, it is within these goals that a person's motivation truly lies. You must look beyond the simple outcome goal and ask why achieving that goal is important to you. How will your life be better as a result of reaching that goal? Discovering the answers to those types of questions will give your outcome goals more motivational power.

Another type of goal that is often neglected, but is a vital part of the change process, is the behavioral goal. Behavioral goals make up the steps of the path that you travel to reach your outcome goals. People generally recognize that in order to achieve their outcome goals they must make behavioral changes, however, these changes are usually made without proper progression. Attempting to drastically alter your behavior in a short amount of time is most often a recipe for failure. When setting manageable behavioral goals, you should always start gradually and build on a foundation of small successes so that the changes are not overwhelming. The key to making lasting behavioral changes is planning and strategizing. This leads us to a third type of goal, cognitive goals.

Goals don't always have to be action or outcome based. Some goals can be thinking and planning goals. When looking at the stages of change, the first 3 stages (pre-contemplation, contemplation and preparation) all occur in your head. You aren't actually taking action until the fourth stage of change. Therefore, setting a cognitive goal of planning or preparing for an action is an important step in the process. An example of a cognitive goal is: "I will think of 3 healthy snacks this week that I can substitute for ice cream in the evening." You are not taking any physical action in this goal, but you are planning for a future goal which could be something like, "I will substitute a granola bar for my usual cup of ice cream 3 nights this week." In the planning stage, your goals are focused around positioning yourself for success in the action phase.

Setting weekly goals is a good way to keep on track. This means that once a week you should sit down and evaluate your goals from the previous week, brainstorm strategies to improve on any areas that you had trouble with, and set goals for the next week. When setting your goals you should always write them down and use the SMART acronym to make sure it is a good goal. SMART = Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely.

Specific – Your goals should be as specific as you can make them. For example, "I will eat healthy" is too vague to be a good goal. How do you define healthy? How often will you be eating that way? If your goal raises unanswered questions like this, then you need to better define it. "I will eat 5 serving of fruits or vegetables at least 4 days this week" is a more specific goal. You could even break it down further and set goals of what fruits and vegetables you will consume at which meals on those days. The more specific a goal is, the easier it is to measure success. That brings us to the next part of the acronym.



Measureable – In order for a goal to be effective there must be a way to measure success. If a goal is vague, then whether or not you have achieved it can be difficult to determine, making it very challenging to stay motivated. Being specific when setting a goal will help to increase its measurability. When you are setting your goal, be clear on things like:

- Frequency: “I will bring my lunch to work 3 days this week.”
- Amount: “I will drink 6, 8oz glasses of water today”
- Duration: “I will do 30 minutes of interval training on the treadmill”

Attainable – Many people make the mistake of setting the bar too high when establishing their goals. I find this to be partially a product of the unreasonable claims made by producers of diet and exercise fad programs. People hear one of the claims that you can lose 30 lbs. in 30 days and they think that is an attainable goal. By setting your expectations for change too high, you decrease the likelihood of success. Don’t forget, success creates a foundation that continued success is built upon, but failures can bring that crashing down. Be sure that the goals that you set for yourself are possible to achieve so that you can move in a positive direction.

Realistic – The concepts of realistic and attainable are closely linked. The distinction between them is that a goal can be attainable, but still not be realistic for you in your current situation. For example, bringing your lunch to work 4 out of 5 days in a week is an attainable goal for the common person. However, if you know that you have to take clients out to lunch 3 days this week, then that goal is not realistic for you at this time. When setting a goal, first decide if that goal can be attained by a person, then decide if it is realistic for you.

Timely – The last criteria of a SMART goal is establishing a timeframe in which to complete your goal. As early as elementary school we all learned the importance of having a due date in regards to getting something accomplished. Putting an end date on your goals will create a sense of importance around the goal and aid in its prioritization, as well as establish the timeframe in which success is measured. Goals need to be set in the short term on a daily or weekly basis to provide tangible steps toward the long term goals.

Writing goals down gives them a greater sense of importance and strengthens your commitment to achieving them. Beginning each goal with “I will” empowers you to accept ownership and responsibility for what you are planning to achieve. Goals that begin with “I would like to” or even “I intend to” convey that what you are stating is a hope rather than a planned event.