

Setting Attainable Goals

“Things kept building up. I was feeling overwhelmed. Goal-setting allowed me to visualize what I wanted and set up strategies so that they would become a reality.”

In recent years many people have taken up running marathons. They don't decide to do this on the morning of the race. Instead, they sit down months in advance and make a plan. Their plan might include a medical checkup, weight training, a change in diet, gradually increasing distance running, and whatever else is necessary to reach the goal.



A goal that you can't reach in one step is called an **Ultimate Goal**: get physically fit, go through that pile of mail, reconnect with friends, find a new job, study for the upcoming exam. Ultimately, you'd like to be able to reach the goal.

A goal you can reach in a single small step is called an **Immediate Goal**: You could do it this week. Phone the gym to find out where it is, open one piece of mail, call one old friend, look at the job ads one time, read part of one chapter of the textbook.

Ultimate Goals can be broken down into many Immediate Goals. Reaching these Immediate Goals creates a sense of satisfaction, self-esteem, and motivation. It is this sense of satisfaction, or progress, that keeps us moving toward the Ultimate Goal. Without these small successes along the way, we could not sustain the enthusiasm we need to reach the Ultimate Goal.

Imagine that you wanted to participate in a five kilometer run. If you set out on the first morning of your training with the goal of completing the full distance in a good time, you would probably fail. If you tried the same thing the next day you would fail again, and again you would be disappointed. Eventually the disappointments would lower your motivation and you would probably give up. **Failure saps confidence and motivation.**

Instead, imagine that your first goal was just to walk one kilometer. Perhaps you could succeed. The next day your goal might be to finish the kilometer one second faster than the day before. Perhaps you could succeed at that too. If you kept setting small but achievable goals, you would create a string of many more successes than failures.

Success builds confidence and motivation. You would be far more likely to stick with your plan, and you would reach your Ultimate Goal faster than if you set your goals out of reach.

Notice that the important thing is not how fast you are when you start out, or how much dedication you have. It is where you set your Immediate Goals that makes the difference.

It is fine to set ambitious Ultimate Goals. But:

In order to reach Ultimate Goals you *must* break them down into easily manageable steps.

Many of us are used to setting our goals out of reach (*"I'll try to get all 43 of these things done today"*). As a result, we feel tired, frustrated, and powerless. It is far better to set goals that we know we can accomplish. Our progress will be faster.

What if I have low energy and motivation?

"It got so the thought of brushing my teeth felt overwhelming. But I still expected to be able to work and keep house and everything else, and the fact that I couldn't just made me feel worse...."

If you have been going through a difficult time recently, goal-setting is even more important. Your energy and motivation are probably lower than usual, so you are less able to get things done. If you expect as much of yourself as you normally do, you will fail much more often. This will rob you of even more confidence and motivation, making it even harder to get things done the next day.

Low mood ⇒ Low energy ⇒ Few accomplishments ⇒ Even lower mood

How do you handle this? *Admit* to yourself that your energy and motivation are limited right now. Then set easier goals than usual.

Perhaps the goals you set will seem ridiculously small (getting out of bed before 2 pm, calling one friend on the phone, paying one bill). But if you can succeed at them, you will build your confidence and motivation slightly (*"Well, at least I can do something"*). Then you may be able to do a bit more. And then a bit more. As your confidence and energy return, you will gradually set more ambitious goals. You will get yourself moving again.

Set small goals ⇒ Succeed ⇒ More motivation ⇒ Set slightly larger goals

The way to get moving is to allow yourself to start *slowly*.

Slowly, yes, but not at a complete stop. *Do* set goals and carry them out – but make them small enough to be *manageable*. The exercise on the next few pages will take you step-by-step through the goal-setting process. It is one of the most important exercises in the manual, so take your time. Most people take more than one sitting to finish it.

Exercise: Turning Problems into Goals and Goals into Plans

The point of this exercise is to take the problems in your life and convert them into Ultimate Goals. Then you will break one of these Ultimate Goals into one or more Immediate Goals that you can actually work on this week.

Step One: The Problem List

The first step in making a plan is to figure out what you would like to change about your life. The next page gives you space to list the problems you have been facing recently. These can be big problems (I need to change careers) or smaller problems (the lawn needs to be mowed). This can be a difficult task. But:

- Use point form. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. The list is just for you.
- Don't dwell on each problem. Just list it and move on to the next.
- Don't worry whether the problems are solvable or not.
- Remember that you don't have to come up with the plan, just the problem.
- You don't have to finish your list in one sitting.

You may find that there isn't room on the next page to list all of the things you would like to change! If so, use additional paper.

Optional Exercise: What would you like?

If you like, complete the following exercise – either in addition to the Problem List, or instead of it.

Take a piece of paper. Write down everything you would like to happen in your life. Travel to Spain? Write it down. Get your accounting certificate? Write it down. Own a fishing boat, throw a party, get along with your family, jog regularly, get out of debt, clean the garage? Write them down.

Don't hold yourself back. Write down everything that comes to mind, even if you are not sure about all of them. Don't stop until you have filled at least a page (and preferably more). Then leave the paper lying around for a day or two. Add new items as they come to mind.

Then go back and place a checkmark (✓) beside the items that you would *most* like to work toward, and that involve *doing* something (rather than thinking or feeling a certain way). Then use this shorter list as you work through the other steps in this section.

Problems and Things I Would Like to Change

Family: _____

Friends: _____

Work Life: _____

Lifestyle: _____

Finances: _____

Other: _____

Brainstorming

People often throw good ideas away without really thinking about them. They make snap decisions about any ideas that come to mind. *"This one is stupid."* *"That one is unrealistic."* Eventually this gets so fast and automatic that it cuts off the flow of ideas altogether: *"I can't think of a thing."*

Brainstorming overcomes this problem by sending the critical part of your mind on a short vacation. How? By splitting the process of problem-solving into two parts.

1. To begin, just try to come up with ideas. Don't worry whether these ideas are any good. If an idea occurs to you, you have to write it down – no matter how silly or unrealistic it seems to be. By ignoring the critical and rejecting part of your mind, you become more creative. You come up with some terrible ideas, but you get some good ones too. If you only come up with good ideas, you haven't loosened up enough. Try to come up with some really ridiculous ideas. This will help to open your mind to more possibilities.
2. Go back to your list a couple of days later. Carefully consider each idea. You may realize that an idea that seemed unrealistic might actually work, or that two silly ideas might be combined into a single good one.

Parts of this section of the manual ask you to come up with a series of ideas on specific topics (your problem list, your list of things you'd like, strategies for working with problems, and so on). Try Brainstorming with some of these exercises. It can be surprisingly helpful at overcoming old and restricting ways of thinking about the challenges you face.

Step Two: Pick ONE Problem

Take a look at your problem list (and, if you completed the Optional Exercise on page 6, your list of goals). Which one would you like to work on first? It should be something that you care about, but not something that seems completely overwhelming right now.

Let go of the other problems or goals on your list for now. The way to make progress is to focus your efforts. Once you have mastered the skill of turning problems into plans, you can tackle them one by one.

Write down the problem or goal you have chosen. Use a full sentence. Instead of *"Social life"* you might say *"Problem # 1 is that I almost never go out or do anything."* This helps define the problem a bit more.

Problem # 1 is: _____

If your sentence describes something that you do *not* like about your life, rewrite it to say what you *would* like instead. Using the social life example above, your goal might be “*I would like to go out with friends two or three times a week.*” A person who is dissatisfied with work might say “*I would like to be happier with my work life.*”

I would like: _____

There. If you started with a problem, you have changed it already. You have made it into an Ultimate Goal.

Step Three: Break Problems and Goals into Bits

The next step is to break your problem or goal into pieces. Almost every problem is really a collection of smaller parts. Here are some sample problems and the bits and pieces that make them up.

“I hate my work.”

I avoid the boss.
I have a difficult coworker.
I hate doing the office mail.
There’s no hope of promotion.
The pay is too low.
Commuting takes too long.

“I never go out.”

I’ve lost touch with my old friends.
I haven’t made new friends.
I can’t afford a baby-sitter.
It’s tempting just to watch TV.
I have too much housework.
I hate bars and nightclubs.

In the space below, break your problem or goal into its bits and pieces. If Problem # 1 is that your kids are out of control, what are the specific problems with their behaviour? If Problem #1 is that you are out of shape, what are all the reasons?

This may take a bit of thought, especially if you are used to thinking of the problem as one big chunk. **Brainstorming** may help you out (see the panel on page 8). Use extra paper if you wish.

Problem: _____

Bits and Pieces: _____

Step Four: Make some Immediate Goals

To get started, pick ONE bit of your problem. Notice that for many problems you don't actually have to solve *all* of the bits and pieces. It can often be enough to solve only some of them.

Next, think of some things you could do that might help. Once again, you may find brainstorming useful. Try to think of as many possible actions as you can. Don't worry whether they are really practical at this point. Here are some examples of problem bits and the solutions people have come up with:

Job: Commuting takes too long.

Listen to audiobooks in the car.
Change work hours to avoid traffic.
Try the other highway.
See if I can work at home some days.
Move closer to work.
Change to the branch closer to home.

Socializing: I can't afford a baby-sitter.

Cut back in other areas to save money.
Socialize with other moms & their kids.
Trade babysitting with Anne.
Exchange baking for baby-sitting.
Ask relatives to sit.
Have friends over to my place.

Now try your own. Don't be too frustrated if you can't think of anything immediately. Just relax and try to come up with odd or impractical solutions to get the flow of ideas going.

Problem/Goal Bit: _____

Possible Actions: _____

Use extra paper if you like.

Step Five: Make your Immediate Goal SMART

Time to get moving. You've identified your Ultimate Goal. Now you need to refine your Immediate Goal.

To start, pick one of the "Possible Actions" you defined on the last page. What is it?

Now make it **SMART**: **S**pecific, **M**y Own, **A**ction-Oriented, **R**ealistic, and **T**ime-Defined.

- **Specific.** If life has been difficult lately, your ability to solve problems on the spot may be weaker than usual. Do you know *exactly* what you are supposed to do? If not, work at defining exactly *how* you are going to carry out your action. If you are going to swim at the community centre, do you know how you will get there? Do you know when the public swim times are? Be as clear as you can.
- **My Own.** Is it your own goal or someone else's? If you are hoping to lift your mood and get your life on track, your goal should be something you want – either because you want to do it or because it will feel good to get it done. As well, your goal should not depend on someone else's cooperation. "*Go to a movie with Frank*" depends on Frank being available and willing to go. A better goal would be "*Phone and invite Frank to a movie,*" because giving the invitation is under your control.
- **Action-Oriented.** Your goal should be to DO something, not to feel or think a certain way while you are doing it. This is because your actions are easier to control than your thoughts or feelings. "*Go for a 10-minute walk*" is better than "*Go for a nice 10-minute walk*" because you can control whether you walk but you can't easily control whether it's nice. Even though you really want to feel better, all Immediate Goals should have to do with your actions. If you do the right things, your emotions will probably change for the better.
- **Realistic.** You *must* have a clear and achievable finish line. If you have been feeling discouraged or stuck recently, you might be tempted to see almost *any* outcome as a failure. One participant in this program swam for the first time in four years and completed fourteen laps of the pool – but labeled the attempt a complete failure because she used to be able to swim twenty laps! Decide *in advance* what you will call a success. Two laps? One? Getting inside the building? Choose a finish line that you already know you can reach. If you're not confident that your goal is achievable, make it smaller. Once you have achieved it, you can set a slightly bigger goal next time. The point is not to set a goal that is out of reach. It is to set a goal you can achieve.
- **Time-Defined.** Your Immediate Goal should include a time frame for completion. If you can't do it this week, set it aside and come up with another goal. You may notice that when you set goals for "*in the next 7 days*" they either don't happen or get done on the 7th day. If so, be more specific for at least some of your goals: Go to the park Tuesday. Wash Wednesday's dinner dishes that evening.

Using these rules, what's your SMART Immediate Goal? Be as precise as you can.

Notice what you have done: You have created a *plan* to get started on your Ultimate Goal. Work on this plan over the coming week. (You might also have made one or two plans during your Core Program meeting.) If you succeed, then return to your list of actions and decide on the *next* step.

That seems like a lot of work just to get one Immediate Goal, doesn't it? Don't worry. You will get faster and faster at setting good Immediate Goals. The first few take a lot of thought, but it gets easier.



Want an example from someone else's life? Here's one:

Problem: I never go out.

Problem Bit: I haven't made new friends.

Ultimate Goal: Get a better social life.

Immediate Goals: Get info on photography club from community centre this week.

Sit with coworkers at lunch on Thursday.

Invite one person from next night school class to coffee afterward.

Each of these Immediate Goals fits the SMART rules. They are Specific, My own (we assume), Action-oriented, Realistic (if the person is confident they are achievable), and Time-defined.

More Tips for Immediate Goals

- **Feeling overwhelmed is useful!** The feeling of being overwhelmed tells you that you are trying to do too much. When you set a goal or try to do something, notice whether you feel overwhelmed. If you do, you haven't set a small enough goal. Make it smaller.
- **Make repetitions into separate goals.** You might be tempted to set a goal of getting to the gym three times this week. But what if you only go twice? You'll have failed. Instead, set three goals: Go to the gym, Go to the gym, Go to the gym. If you go twice, you will have two successes instead of one failure.
- **Don't wait until you feel like it!** It's tempting to say *"I'll start to work on my tax return when I feel like it."* But let's face it: You are never going to feel like doing your taxes. If you've been depressed recently, you aren't even going to "feel like" seeing your friends or working on your favourite hobby. Do it because you have *planned* to do it. Don't wait for the impulse.
- **For vague goals, use time as your finish line.** Maybe one of your goals is to clean out the storage locker. But how long will that take? *"Hmm, maybe an hour, maybe a day."* This is no good because you don't know how difficult a goal it is. Whenever the length of a task is uncertain, set a time goal instead: *"Spend 40 minutes working on the storage locker."*

It is not important for you to take great strides forward with each step. The important thing is to get back the sense that you can be successful – even if your plans may seem small (*"Clean one dish..."*). As you regain some of your confidence, you will be able to do a bit more. As energy returns, the pace of improvement begins to accelerate.

What if I don't succeed?

Don't be too surprised. You may *still* have made your Immediate Goal too difficult. We are so used to setting our goals out of reach that it's hard to get more realistic. And if you are depressed or otherwise have low energy right now, you might be surprised how small your goals must be. Just make your next goal even easier, and keep shrinking your Immediate Goal until you succeed.

When in doubt, make your Immediate Goal smaller. A goal that is easier than expected to reach is better than one that turns out to be unattainable.

"I'd look at other people and think 'What's the matter with me?' Physically there was nothing wrong, so why shouldn't I expect myself to act normally? The real me only started coming back when I stopped telling myself where I 'should' be and began comparing myself to where I was the day before. I started seeing my progress instead of a string of failures."

Common Pitfalls in Goal-Setting

1. Trying to do too much.

Many people make their Immediate Goals too difficult. Then they don't succeed (or feel overwhelmed and don't try at all), and blame themselves for not having enough drive or motivation. If this is like you, the problem is *not* your lack of drive! The problem is that you are *too eager* to solve your problems. As a result, you haven't broken your goals into small enough steps. **The desire to get better can actually slow you down.**

The solution is to decide on your Ultimate Goals, then *give up* on reaching them for the next little while. Allow yourself to make Immediate Goals that are easy enough to accomplish. The resulting sense of progress and movement will help you to reach your bigger goals more quickly.

Work steadily, but don't try your hardest.

2. Feeling discouraged after one or two steps.

Have you ever walked down a long road, and had the sense that you weren't making any progress toward your destination? Perhaps you turned to look behind you and realized how far you had really come.

Some people take a few small steps toward an important Ultimate Goal and begin to feel discouraged. They focus on the amount of work it will take for them to reach their Ultimate Goal. It begins to feel overwhelming, and it seems as though they have made no real progress. The problem is that they forget to focus on the amount they have already done. Look behind you and focus on the steps you have already made.

Dwell on how far you have come, not on how far you have yet to go.

3. Disqualifying your successes.

Some people reach their Immediate Goal but never give themselves credit for it. Sometimes they focus on negative aspects of their experiences. For example, a man may set a goal of going skating for the first time in a year. He does this, but trips as he gets on the ice and feels embarrassed, so he tells himself that his effort was a failure. In fact, it wasn't a failure at all: His goal was to go skating and he went skating.

Other people focus on how they *felt* during the experience. A woman who used to play the drums sets the goal of playing for twenty minutes and does so. But it doesn't give her the feeling of enjoyment she remembers from years ago and so she decides it was a failure. But the goal was to play, not to enjoy playing. If she could give up trying to control how she felt, she might begin to enjoy the experience.

Give yourself credit for your successes.