

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Personal Goal Setting

What are your goals? Most people at some point in their lives are asked—and ask themselves—this question. The university graduate, the up-and-coming athlete, the new executive, or even the just-married couple all have goals to pursue. Especially in western society, people are taught at an early age to set goals and strive for excellence. We are encouraged to aspire to higher levels of competency and well-being; to choose a target, identify and overcome barriers, measure our progress and achieve our objectives.

Unfortunately, the pressures instilled by society (teachers, parents, mentors) on the setting and achievement of goals can contribute to significant levels of stress, anxiety and even depression in those who experience difficulty meeting society's expectations. Instead of working constructively towards the desired goals, the stressed or depressed individual becomes less focused and more disorganized. Emotions become intensified which further interfere with their progress. Instead of striving productively, performance becomes counterproductive.

The downside of goal setting can be avoided by following certain principles. These will help you set realistic, achievable goals that actually promote, instead of hinder, personal self-development.

A good guideline for evaluating whether your goals will lead to positive personal growth, and not leave you feeling discouraged, is the SMART principle of goal setting. SMART goals are:

Specific. Elaborate on your goal to provide enough detail so that you know exactly what actions you should take to achieve your objective. For example, "lose weight" is better stated as "lose 10 pounds by cutting down on fat and sugar in my diet, and exercising at the fitness club three times a week."

Measurable. Your goal must have some measurement attached to it, so that you will know when you have reached it. For example, "feel more satisfied with my marriage" is a goal, but may be a difficult one to measure. Ask yourself what would be different in your relationship that might indicate you are feeling more satisfied with it: would you be spending more time together? Would you have at least one night a week out together, without the kids? Would you argue less?

Attainable. An attainable goal is one that you can reasonably expect to achieve. Spending an evening a week with your partner is likely attainable; never having another argument is likely not attainable.

Realistic. Bite off manageable chunks for yourself, or you will set yourself up to fail. Even a fairly aggressive goal can be achieved if it's broken down into smaller tasks. For example, if you are 30 pounds overweight, perhaps your first goal should be to join a gym and lose 10 pounds. Once you achieve that, you can set another, realistic goal. This is a more realistic path to success than setting an unrealistic (and therefore unattainable goal) at the beginning.

Timed. Setting a deadline for yourself is critical. And your deadline should be specific, attainable and realistic, too. When setting a timeline for your goal, consider all of the variables that might impact your progress, such as the complexity or difficulty of your goal, your current status and capabilities, and how much time you have to devote to the achievement of this particular goal.

To these principles, we would add three additional rules to make your SMART goals even smarter:

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Choose goals for their intrinsic value. Ideally, you should choose your goals mainly for personal reasons. Intrinsically-set goals are those that you want for reasons that have to do with your own deepest desires and needs, not for anyone else's. Goals that you set because you believe you 'should' or 'ought' to achieve them are probably not intrinsic. Similarly, any goal that you choose as a result of outside pressure, or because you believe your self-worth is linked to achieving a certain status level are probably not intrinsic goals. That said, having a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for goal setting is appropriate providing the intrinsic reasons are prominent. One is more likely to reach a goal and experience true satisfaction and contentment if intrinsic goal setting is achieved.

Choose both long-term and short-term goals. Setting both long-term and short-term goals can significantly add to your motivation and overall success. The long-term goal is your ultimate goal ("I want to be Vice President of Marketing by the age of 35.") Many long-term goals are very challenging, require a lot of preparation and work, and can take considerable time (in some cases, years).

In cases such as these, the individual may find it difficult to stay motivated because the payoff for reaching the goal is far away. It's a good idea to therefore set some short-term goals ("complete my MBA in marketing") that will get you part of the way to your ultimate goal. Setting short-term or interim goals can help you maintain your motivation and provide feedback on your progress.

Reward yourself. To stay motivated, especially for long-term goals, implement a reward system for yourself. Reward yourself at key milestones, and after you have achieved your short-term or interim goals. For example, if your weight loss goal includes going to the gym three times each week for a period of 12 months, reward yourself after each month of diligent gym-going.

Rewards can be financial, personal, social—anything that brings you pleasure and has meaning for you. Treating yourself to a new outfit, visiting a favorite restaurant, spending time with someone you don't get to see too often—all of these can be rewards. Rewards can also be avoiding doing things you don't like to do: if you hate to clean your car, why not treat yourself to a professional car wash as a reward?

Identifying a task or activity that you don't like to do can also be helpful if you think that you might need the additional motivation of a potential "punishment" to keep you on track towards your goal. Punishing yourself is typically very difficult for individuals to accomplish (it's too easy to let yourself off the hook!), so consider enlisting a friend's support. If you don't make it to the gym three times this week, promise a friend that you'll clean her kitchen every night next week: and make sure she holds you to it!

The achievement of goals is an important part of our lives, whether you follow a formal program of personal goal setting or not. As you become more and more conscious of setting and achieving goals, the more you will accomplish, and the more personal satisfaction you will feel.