

BEHAVIOR CHANGE QUICK TIPS: goal setting basics



HOW YOU WRITE YOUR GOALS CREATES A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION.

Goal setting is one of the first steps to organize and plan your health behavior change. Setting SMART goals is a common approach, i.e. setting goals that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Regardless of if you use that approach or not, how you write out your goals will set you up for success if you are as detailed as possible. Think of it as your blueprint.

Here are my top tips to turn your goals into action:

- **COLLECT BASELINE.** It's important to know your starting point in order to appropriately set a goal. What is your baseline - i.e. what are your current, consistent behaviors? There is no judgement about what the baseline is - be realistic about your current behaviors in regards to your health goal. For example, if the health goal is to increase weekly exercise, a few questions to explore could be: how many days per week do you complete a workout, what type of workout (strength training, class, walk, run, bike, yoga, etc.), duration of workout, how long have you been consistent doing it? Write down your answers.
- **START SMALL.** Now that you have collected your baseline, think about an action item that feels like a 7 out of 10 in confidence you can achieve it during the upcoming week. Whatever that action item is, that's a great first step. For example, if your current weekly exercise is 1 x 30 minute walk, a first step could be 2 x 30 minute walks. By starting small, you are better able to tackle a manageable task and work through barriers along the way with success.

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- **BE SPECIFIC.** When writing out your goal, be as specific as possible. This will create your blueprint for action. What is the action item, how many times, how many days, at what time of day, on what days, where, with who, by when - lay out all of the details as you write down your goal. By doing this, you are giving yourself all the planning and information needed to make it happen. For example, let's go back to the goal of increasing weekly exercise: "I will walk the neighborhood at 12pm for 30 minutes on Tuesday and Thursday with my dog."
- **BE REALISTIC.** Take it one week at a time, and reevaluate at the end of the week. Each time you set a new goal, think about the 1 to 10 scale with 1 representing "it's never going to happen" and 10 representing "it pretty much happens already". A realistic goal is one that feels like a 7 out of 10 on that scale. By setting realistic goals, you are allowing space to explore and overcome barriers. We often fail when we try to do too much, too soon because the support systems to make the actions happen have not yet been established.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Short-term goals are ones that can be achieved within the next week to several months. Long-term goals are ones that can be achieved in one year to several years. Both are important to consider when planning out your behavior change.

These tips are geared toward short-term goals and getting you started with your behavior change; however, you can apply the same principles to long-term goals. What feels like a 7 out of 10 in confidence that you can make it happen in one year from now? What about five years? Be as specific as possible as you write out your long-term goals.

You don't always have to set a new goal week to week. Sometimes it's helpful to repeat the same goal for consistency.