

Setting Goals and Sticking to Them



The early Romans revered Janus, the god with two faces—one facing forward, the other gazing behind. At the beginning of January, the month named to honor the Roman god, that image fits how most of us feel. Like Janus, we look back at the year gone by, while anticipating the 12 months ahead.

We express our hopes for the new year with grand resolutions, such as losing 40 pounds before bathing-suit season or spending 90 minutes a day sweating at the gym. Yet, after a month or two, those big dreams prove to be impossible to carry out.

Life intrudes, as work and family demand our time. Or, we find that walking on a treadmill is just, well, boring. Discouragement sets in, followed by inaction, guilt, avoiding thinking about our goal, and eating lots of chocolate (or chips) for consolation.

This cycle isn't inevitable. You can set realistic, achievable goals for a more healthful life in the new year. What's more, those targets—whether for weight loss, exercise or both—will produce results that help you look and feel better.

Get going the right way: Goal-setting is more than making a wish and hoping it will come true. It's proven to be effective for making real changes in your physical activity level and diet.

To set and achieve your goal, research shows it helps to follow this process.

- Recognize what you need to change.
- Establish a goal.
- Begin a goal-directed activity.
- Track your progress
- Reward yourself.

Sounds simple, right? So why do January's good intentions often end up discarded by March? "Many goals start out being too difficult and too general. That's a set up for failure," says Mical Kay Shilts, Ph.D., assistant professor, Family and Consumer Sciences Department, California State University, Sacramento.

Before deciding on your goal, she advises, keep a food or exercise diary for a week to get a clear view of your current lifestyle. Every day, write down what you eat and your physical activity.

Then use that snapshot of your life to choose an area to focus on. You may see that you're spending hours on the living room couch at night or having fast-food lunches most days of the week. By looking at what you're currently doing "you can set a goal and know where you started," Shilts says.

Be specific: Choose a precise, positive goal for a short period of time. Make it challenging enough to motivate you, without being beyond your capabilities.

If you haven't exercised in years, don't plan on running 20 miles a week—it'll never happen. Instead, think of your goal as, "I'll take a walk with the dog three times this week."

Pick a goal-directed activity that's fun and enticing enough that you'll keep doing it. Social support helps you stay motivated, says Shilts, so try to exercise with a friend, spouse or child.

Are you fighting extra weight? Instead of saying, "I want to drop 50 pounds," state your goal as "I will lose one pound this week." You'll probably be able to meet that goal successfully, and even repeat it the following week. Remember, recommended weight loss for most people is only about one pound per week.

Realistic goals might not seem exciting, but grander plans are often self-defeating. "People get stumped when they have a huge goal, so they put it off," Shilts says. By achieving a smaller goal, "you see what you've done, then you can tackle the next goal."

Benefits of brief exercise: Short, intermittent bouts of physical activity—such as two 15-minute sessions of brisk walking, five days a week—are useful when you're getting started with a fitness or weight loss goal. Brief workouts help you:

- Incorporate exercise into your life.
- Prevent weight gain.
- Improve your cholesterol and insulin levels.
- Lower your risk of dropping out of exercising in the first few months.
- Reward yourself.

"Weight maintenance without exercise is almost unheard of," says Joseph E. Donnelly, director, Center for Physical Activity and Weight Management, University of Kansas.

His program starts participants, who are overweight and often inactive, with two 10-minute walking sessions, five days a week (100 minutes of activity). The goal is for them to be exercising 300 minutes each week after six months.

"For something to become a habit, you have to start from the beginning," Donnelly says. "If you weren't exercising from the start, when you get to the maintenance stage, you won't be physically fit enough to perform the exercises you need to keep the weight off."

Keep records: Track your progress by scheduling your exercise and diet plan for the week ahead. This can be as simple as writing "Lunch: chicken salad, apple, milk" or "6 p.m.: walk with Mary" on the appropriate day on a calendar.

Be sure to check off items as you accomplish them. The simple act of placing a check mark on a calendar day can be very encouraging and motivating. It also helps remind you when you need to catch up on your week's goal.

Looking at your plan and achievements every day mentally reinforces the importance of your goal. "People who are successful are fanatical record keepers," says Donnelly.

At the end of the week, reward yourself with a relaxing bath, a nonfat treat, time alone listening to a favorite CD or other enjoyment. Rewards for "good behavior" make your goal activity pleasurable and inspire you to continue doing it.

Switch to Plan B: Okay, so you pledged to go to the gym three times a week, but you only went once last week and not at all this week. Now what?

First, don't let a problem or two rock your boat. Try getting back on track with the goal and schedule you chose. If that doesn't work, revise your goal. "People think it's set in stone," Shilts says. "It can be changed."

Too often, we stop pursuing any goal just because we failed to accomplish the original one. Instead, create Plan B—a more realistic alternative—and put it into action. For example, if your goal to exercise at the gym isn't working, try brisk walking at lunchtime with a co-worker or around your neighborhood twice a week.

Schedule your alternate goal activities into your week, just as you did your original plan. Keep track of your successes and reward yourself for achievements.

If you're revising your physical activity goal downward, sneak in extra exercise by making it part of something else you have to do: walk stairs instead of taking elevators, carry your own groceries, do yard work that you usually assign to someone else.

Keep going: Don't give up just because you couldn't achieve the first goal you set.

Look at what's possible to achieve right now. When you string together several short-term goals, you'll discover that you've accomplished the long-term goal that once seemed so impossible.

And give yourself credit for what you're able to do.

"It's hard to change any behavior," Shilts says. "If you make a small change, it's an awesome accomplishment."

From: <http://www.healthywomen.org/content/article/setting-goals-and-sticking-them>
December 29, 2009