

Learning to change: Setting achievable goals guide

Introduction

Welcome to this Foothold and Rightsteps guide on how to set realistic and achievable goals.

This guide will help you consider:

- **How to set achievable goals**
- **How to eliminate barriers to achieving goals**
- **Tracking progress**

There are also some links to further resources at the end of this guide that can be used to access more information about making change through achievable goal-setting.

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Learning to change

Setting goals is a huge part of our lives: how healthily we want to eat, how much exercise we want to do.

Everything comes down to goals, and what we would like to accomplish.

But making changes is not always easy. We often want to make a change but we may not be sure how to get started.

We often set a certain goal but find it hard to achieve it.

Making any changes may not even feel possible at all right now. Our motivation also normally fluctuates as we try to develop new habits or change old ones.

They say ‘old habits die hard’, and it’s so true! It can take a while before any changes become new habits. And, we usually face many roadblocks along the way.

By thinking about change, we are making a start. With the right help and support, change is possible; it’s up to us how to go about this.

Tackling change

However big or small your goal may be, this guide will show you three effective steps to help you **GET** to your goal.

Goal setting

“I don’t need to do this alone.”

Making changes can feel easier with **SMART** goal setting. **SMART** stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound.

S – Specific

Your goal should be clear and easy to understand. The more specific you are the greater the chance you’ll get exactly that.



For example, the goal “I’d like to get healthy,” is too general.

Think about what is it exactly that you want to achieve. For example:

- Losing weight?
- Starting to exercise?
- Stopping smoking?

Break it down into smaller steps and it will be easier to achieve it.

M – Measurable

You’ll need evidence that you have achieved your goal.

Setting a measurable goal means that you can identify what exactly you will see, hear and feel when you reach it.

For example, saying “I am doing better” is not evidence of achieving a healthier lifestyle; stopping smoking or feeling less breathless is.

A – Achievable

This focuses on the things you can do in order to make your goal more achievable. For example, you may need certain experience, skills or resources.

If you don’t currently have these skills or lack necessary experience, training or resources, consider what you need to do in order to attain them.

R – Relevant

Set goals that are important to you and where you are in your life right now. Ask yourself whether they are your goals or someone else’s – you are more likely to achieve a goal that is really important to you than to someone else.

For example: “I want to lose weight.”

Is this goal still relevant to you?

If you’re not concerned about your weight anymore or it’s not a good time in your life to focus on that, choose something else that IS motivating you.



T – Time-bound

Setting deadlines can often make us switch to action. Setting a realistic deadline is important. Ask yourself what can be accomplished within that time period.

Keep deadlines flexible too; that way you can keep your morale high. Being too strict with deadlines can lead you into an awful race against time – which is most likely not how you want to achieve anything.

Exercise

Take a few moments to identify your own **SMART** goal. What goal can you identify?

Here are a few examples:

- I will cycle to work 3 days every week.
- I will drink water instead of soft drinks every other day this week.
- I will bring my lunch to work instead of eating out 3 days next week.

Eliminate barriers

“I enjoy drinking with my friends.”

‘Barriers’ are things that can get in our way of achieving our goal. Some barriers can keep us from even trying to make a change. Others can pop up later.

It’s always helpful to have a plan in place to help us deal with them.

In this way, when we hit a barrier – and most people do – we will know what to do.

Places and situations

There may be places or situations where you find it harder to stick to your goal. If so, you may want to consider how you can manage.

For example, you may be trying to give up smoking. However, you find that after a meal you feel more tempted to smoke. You could try going for a walk, snacking on nuts, chewing gum or brushing your teeth after meals instead.



People

You may have people in your life who are being unsupportive. If so, you can seek support from people who can help and encourage you instead.

For example, talk to family members and friends to see if someone wants to be active with you or cheer you on. If you have concerns about your health, you can seek advice from your GP to make sure you are doing exercise safely.

Thoughts and feelings

We all sometimes have doubts about our ability to change. We may also find it harder to make changes when we are in a particular mood, e.g. when we are stressed or tired.

Start being 'your own best friend' by encouraging and believing in yourself more. Nurture your efforts with positive supportive words and actions.

For example, keep saying to yourself: "I can do it this time. I will do it." You'll then be halfway there.

Exercise

Take some time to think about your own barriers to change and how you can overcome them. To help you with this, try asking yourself the following questions:

Places and situations

- Could anything about my surroundings get in my way, e.g. lack of facilities or equipment?
- What can I do to change this?
- Do some places or situations make it harder to stick to my goal?
- How will I deal with this?



People

- Are there any people in my life who are unsupportive?
- Are there any other people who can support me instead?

Thoughts and feelings

- Do I have doubts about my ability to change?
- How can I challenge these?
- Do I find it harder sticking to my goal when I am in a particular mood, e.g. when I am stressed or tired?
- How can I improve how I feel?

Tracking progress

“I am starting to feel more in control.”

One way of building confidence to change is by tracking our progress. This can motivate us when we see that we are succeeding or tell us something may be wrong when we're not.

For example, we often underestimate or overestimate how successful we are – such as underestimating the number of unhealthy foods we eat or overestimating the time we spend exercising. Tracking our progress can give us a realistic picture of how we are doing.

What information can we track?

You can keep track of what exactly you are (and aren't) doing. This can help you see whether you are changing in the desired direction.

For example, if you are trying to improve your diet, you could keep a diary where you track exactly what you eat. Or, if you are trying to get more active, you could keep a diary where you track how much exercise you actually do.

You can also note what situations, times of day or which people help you and plan these for next time.



How do we track our progress?

You could use a piece of paper to create a diary. Alternatively, you could use an electronic diary on a tablet or phone. There are also many apps that can help you track your progress, such as Loop-habit or Habitbull.

Reward your success

We often don't think of celebrating our successes or rewarding ourselves for them. But giving ourselves little treats to reward ourselves when we are making progress can encourage us to keep going.

Rewards don't need to cost money. For example, you could ask friends or family to look after your children so you can have some time to yourself. Or, you could spend the money that you'd have spent on cigarettes on a reward for you.

Learn from your setbacks

Most of us will experience setbacks along the way, but we can learn from these. By tracking our progress, we can identify which situations led to our setback and avoid these next time.

For example, we could avoid going shopping when we are hungry next time as this can encourage us to buy unhealthy food.

We can also try new ways of coping next time we find ourselves in these situations. For example, we could carry a banana in our bag to eat next time we feel tempted by unhealthy snacks again.

Try not to give up

Remember to be patient with yourself. It often takes a while before we can see significant changes. Making changes is never a smooth process and involves many 'ups' and 'downs' on the way.

Looking back at your 'up' phases can keep you going during any 'down' phases.



Exercise

To track your progress, you can start recording the times you'll be doing your desired activity every week. You could write down exactly what you are doing and at what time, where you are, whom you are with or for how long you do your activity.

For example:

My goal is:

"I want to go to the gym three times next week."

Monday: 6-7:10pm – my local gym with Mike. Rowing and weights.

Tuesday: 5:30-6:20pm – my local gym alone. Weights.

Friday: 7-8:30pm – my local gym with Jane. Running and rowing.

Learning to change summary

You've taken the first step towards learning to change through achievable goal-setting by reading this guide. Make sure you keep tracking your progress to help you **GET** to your goal!

You've had the opportunity to explore three simple steps to help you **GET** to your goal:

1. Goal setting
2. Eliminate barriers
3. Tracking progress

Further support and resources

If you or someone you know would benefit from further support, here are some helpful resources:



Wellbeing sessions

Our wellbeing sessions are based on psychological treatments recommended by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE).

They are available for a number of difficulties, such as anxiety, low mood or stress problems. People can work through the sessions (typically 6-8) at a pace that suits them best.

[Click here to access the Foothold wellbeing hub](#)

Turning Point

Turning Point offers a wide range of health and wellbeing services, supporting individuals with mental health, physical health, substance abuse and learning disabilities needs.

[Click here to access the Turning Point website](#)

GP

Your GP will be able to discuss things with you in more detail, offer support and advice as well as suggesting next steps, if needed.

[Click here to find your GP](#)

