

FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

PERSONAL COUNSELING CENTER

Goals Not Rules

Hello fellow humans,

I hope this newsletter finds you well. As if the first four weeks of this stay at home order hasn't been tough enough, Governor Whitmer has extended the stay at home order through April 30th meaning we get another fun threeish weeks of being mandated home-bodies. I would love to hear any secrets of survival you have discovered. I have recently developed a love for "oddly satisfying" YouTube videos set to relaxing music ([Example](#)). Good for anxiety and wasting time, don't judge me!

Since we are going to be stuck at home through the end of this month, I thought a fun topic this week could be about goal setting. As you all know, doing therapy sessions with me typically involves goal setting. From a clinical standpoint it is helpful for me to know what you want to accomplish. While conducting our initial intake I may key on a number of different topics that could be worth exploring in therapy, however if that isn't something you are interested in doing then it probably isn't going to be worth your time. I have YOU set goals because I know that is where your motivation is. This week I wanted to expand on the idea of goal setting and talk about how to set and reach our goals. I want to move to a broader perspective of how you set goals and potential traps we fall into.

How do you set goals? It feels like a simple yet complicated question to answer. What is your goal's timeline, topic, desired outcomes? How do you know you are making progress on that goal? How do you know when you should abandon the goal and set a new goal? When you think about your goal setting, I want you to think broadly. Doing well in school is a perfect goal and hopefully something you all strive for. However, you are more than just a student and I want you to set other goals that don't necessarily relate to you passing all your classes as well. I want you to think about setting goals around your mental and physical health. Goals related to your social life and relationships with others. Consider professional goals. As we talk about how to set goals, I want you to consider the spectrum of things that you want to improve/accomplish.

In doing research for this newsletter most advice revolves around some key points:

1. Set goals that you are motivated to work on and/or align with your identity and life's purpose. It doesn't make sense to try and set goals that you aren't passionate about working toward. I am not going to set a goal to be better at physics? No, I am not. Do I think Neil deGrasse Tyson is fascinating? I do! Am I motivated to learn how particles work? Not particularly. When we set goals make sure they are things that you want to accomplish. You will find it very difficult to achieve things you have no drive to do the work.

2. Define what your goal is. The acronym I came across often was to set **SMART** goals, **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, **T**ime bound. You want to set goals that have clear parameters around them. You need to define what you are working toward (ie. I want to pay off my credit card). You want to be able to measure the progress (ie. Look! I paid down \$50.00 on my credit card). You want the goal to be realistic and achievable with a time frame that you are shooting toward (ie. I am hoping to pay off my credit card in 6 months).

3. Find ways to keep yourself accountable. There are multiple ways to do this. I encourage you to write your goals down as well as the steps you plan to take to work toward your goal. Display your goal somewhere you will see it. A bedroom mirror, computer/phone background, a cork board. This is one of the reasons that doing vision boards can be helpful because they are often eye catching while also containing many of your goals. Here is a [link](#) from HuffPost talking about how to create effective vision boards if you are interested (and crafty). Telling others about your goals can also be helpful. Find yourself an “accountabili-buddy” for going to the gym or to study with. Posting your goals on social media may be another way to keep yourself accountable.

4. Make a plan on how you are going to work and accomplish your goal. For some of you that may look like a timeline or to-do list. For others it could be thinking through what each step will look like in accomplishing the goal. The more detail you can include in your plan, the easier it will be to follow through.

5. GO F!@KING AFTER IT. Most of the sources I found don't include swear words, but the final step is to go to work. Change is hard and depending on the goal you have set you may find challenges. If your goal is to work out then you are going to be sore and tired for a while, DON'T STOP! If your goal is to be debt free then maybe you might have to make financial sacrifice for a while DON'T STOP! I like to think about the concept of momentum and finding ways to keep it going. Once you start moving on your goals do not allow yourself to stop. If you find that you have lost focus or aren't working toward your goal, show yourself some compassion, figure out what happened and get back on track.

I used a couple of different sources for these tips, if you are interested in the full reads follow these links: [HERE](#), [Here](#), [also here](#), [ALL THE LINKS](#).

I also wanted to talk about some potential cognitive and behavioral traps with goal setting as well. Just be aware that you may run into some of these. The title of this newsletter is the first major trap I see many clients fall into. Think to yourself, what is the difference between a “goal” and a “rule”. The answer: If you don't reach your goal you keep pushing, you adjust. If you don't follow your rule you get punished. Please be kind to yourself when you work toward your goals. Change is hard and it takes time to create a new habit. Rather than beating the hell out of yourself when you miss the workout or didn't quite finish the assignment, reflect on what happened and make adjustments.

A major trap we fall into is setting unrealistic goals. I can't tell you the number of people who set goals for things that just aren't going to happen. If your goal is “I never want to feel anxious again” then too bad, because you will, that's life. However, the goal “I want to be better at managing my anxiety and have fewer panic attacks” is completely attainable. You may have a tough time reaching a goal that says you need to work out 5 hours per day, everyday of the week. There isn't that much time in the day for most of us. You can likely achieve a goal that involves working out for 30 minutes a day. Its more realistic.

One thing my clients do that drive me crazy is when they don't celebrate and affirm their progress. When we are looking at changing/adding behavior the easiest way to do it is with positive reinforcement. How do you positively reinforce yourself? The easiest thing you can do is when you take your first step toward your goal, pause, and allow yourself to feel good about it. Take 30 seconds and affirm what you just did and feel proud of yourself. Do not get caught in the idea that you haven't accomplished enough to celebrate, or your progress isn't "big enough" to warrant praise. If your goal is to be more confident and you talked to one new person, throw yourself a party! You made progress. Every step toward your goal will be hard and you deserve to feel good about it.

The last thing I wanted to touch on is what you can expect when working toward goals and introducing new behaviors. Most people think that getting started is the hardest part. I agree that the first step is hard, however I disagree that starting is the toughest. I believe that day 2, 3, and 4 are harder than day one. Think about New Years Resolutions that we set. The most common one that everyone sets is they want to lose weight and work out. Come January the REC will be packed and people will be working toward their goal. But what happens in February? Gyms get significantly less busy. Getting started is hard but keeping the momentum going is harder. Be mindful of this when working toward your goal. Know that things won't get "easier" for a while and that is ok. Just because something is hard doesn't mean you can't do it; in fact, I would challenge you that you are much stronger than you give yourself credit for. Do it because it's hard.

A couple of good YouTube videos that may interest you: A [TedTalk](#) that speaks to setting the "right goals" for success. A different [TedTalk](#) that focuses on achieving "your most ambitious goals". Finally just a little motivation if you are in need [Here](#).

For homework this week I want you to set multiple goals. I want you to get used to setting a daily goal for yourself, a weekly goal, and then maybe a broader multiple month goal. For me, my daily goals typically are simple, do a load of laundry, go grocery shopping. I have also set broader "quarantine goals" for myself. If I am going to be stuck at home then I am going to work on the projects I have been putting off. I have broader, professional and personal goals that have longer timelines. It doesn't matter which goal I worked on, at the end of the day I affirm my progress and think what my next step is going to be. I want you to practice and do the same. What is your goal today? What do you want to accomplish by the end of the month? What do you hope to accomplish by the end of the year? Be bold and push yourself. You can do it!

Take Care of yourself and wash your hands,

Andy