

Making a Change Priorities, Goal Setting, and Action

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Many people decide to make changes in the following areas:

- Relationships*—how we interact with family, friends, co-workers, or community members
- Physical well-being*—how we care for our bodies
- Resource management*—how we manage our money and time
- Psychological well being*—how we feel about ourselves

Priorities

Sometimes people decide to make several changes at the same time. For example: a person may choose to return to college, accept a promotion at work, and train for a marathon. Making several changes in your life at one time may seem overwhelming because daily activities are already demanding. To increase success in making changes, it's usually best to set priorities. You can begin to set priorities by asking yourself what change is most important and what is most urgent.

Often, making one change in your life results in many changes. You may be able to address one priority for change while also working on another by selecting changes that have common action plans.

For Example: You may want to find more time to relax or think, and also choose to make changes in your physical health. Part of the action plan in each of these areas could involve exercising. Walking every day for 30 minutes is a change that can address both desires.

Setting Specific and Measurable Goals

The authors of *Motivation and Goal-Setting* report that only five percent of Americans set goals. Maybe this is because many of us think goal setting is hard work, or it could be we avoid the “soul-searching” necessary to know what we really want in life. We may fear we won't reach our goals, or we may attain goals we actually don't deserve. Take a moment to think about your goal setting practices in the past. Have you set goals for yourself throughout your life? If you haven't set goals, ask yourself – why not? See your excuses as excuses. Then get to work!

To set a specific and measurable goal, think about:

- Exactly what you want to achieve.
- What you must do, and will agree to do, to achieve the goal.
- How long it will take to achieve the goal.
- Whether or not you have the resources that will be required to achieve the goal.



"I want to lose some weight" is a vague goal.

An example of a specific and measurable weight loss goal might be:

"During the months of March and April I will lose 12 pounds by skipping dessert every other day, biking to work, and jogging 3 miles on the weekends."

This goal commits you to losing 12 pounds in 8 weeks. The goal is clear and measurable. You know what the work is, and you will know if you have succeeded or not!

It's helpful to write down your goal and review it often. This provides powerful support, and assists in strengthening your commitment. As you work toward your goal, "see" your goal being met. Imagine what achieving your goal would look and feel like. Keep that positive feeling in mind during the period of change.

Developing an Action Plan

A goal is the end-result you want. The action plan contains the steps you must take to get that result. Record your action plan and refer to it often. Similar to a goal statement, an action plan needs to be specific and realistic.

Action Plan Example: *Let's say that your goal is to increase the amount of positive conversation with your teenage son to 1 hour a day on weekdays and 2 hours on weekend days within 2 months' time. Your action plan might include the following: discussing your goal with family members, taking a parenting class, reading two books on communication in the first month, practicing new communication skills every day, and planning new activities with your son.*

A worksheet to help you organize your goals and action plans is printed at the end of this factsheet. The worksheet also asks questions to help you organize a support system, stay motivated, address barriers, and record progress

Writing down goals doesn't mean that they can't be amended. You may find barriers to your initial plan that you didn't initially consider. You may also have new ideas after you start. Being flexible will help you to stay creative when there is a problem. But remember, keep barriers from stopping you, work toward getting around them.

Being Realistic

When people first set a goal, they are usually very excited. They're sure that they will accomplish it. This excitement helps us get started. It can also lead us to set unrealistically high goals, however. To succeed in personal change, both goals and action plans must be realistic.

Being realistic means we balance resources (time, energy, finances, and physical ability), with that wonderful "can do" attitude. Begin by asking yourself if your goal and action plan are physically, emotionally, and financially safe.

Some risk-taking may be helpful when making a personal change, but it's wise to discuss risks with someone who knows about the risks you have in mind. For example, risk-taking could be discussed with the following professionals: diet and exercise - your *physician*; personal development and relationships - a *counselor*; and the way your money is used or saved - a *financial advisor*.

Recording Progress

How will you know if you are on track with reaching your goal? "I don't have time for paperwork!" you may say. You want to succeed, but you don't have the time to actually make a record of your activities. "It's easy to document when I reach some goals while others are much harder," you may add.

Seeing progress toward a goal is a very positive reward and motivator. Some changes are more easily recorded than others. Changes that are linked to numbers can be easily noted in a file, on a piece of paper attached to the refrigerator, or on your desk at work. Recording weight loss,

increased financial assets, or number of hours spent in an activity are examples of goals that may be easily recorded. Other ways to mark progress may be to “check off” action plan items or to keep a diary of activities, thoughts, and feelings.

The point of recording is not to add another task to already busy lives, but to help you see your progress. Be creative in setting up a system that works for you!

Establishing Rewards

The ultimate reward for change (in relationships, health, financial security, and ourselves) is the feeling you get when you *know* that change has been made. However, it may help to create rewards for progress along the way.

You need not limit your vision of a reward to something that is material. A positive comment

can be golden. As you set goals, share them with your family and friends. It’s a good idea to express your need for support.

A Final Word about Making A Change

Life doesn’t always unfold as planned. Good intentions, goal setting statements, action plans, activity recordings, and rewards are sometimes not enough for us to successfully make changes. Comfort yourself with the fact that you can choose to keep trying until you succeed.

Other topics within the series of Rutgers Cooperative Extension change fact sheets may help you on the journey of making new changes in your life or “regrouping” to try again. Order **Understanding Change** (FS 981), **So You Want to Make a Change** (FS 982), **Making A Change: Keys to Success** (FS 984) for more information.

References

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Making A Change Worksheet

This worksheet is designed help organize your goals and action plans. In addition, answers to worksheet questions will clarify the issues of developing a support system, staying motivated, addressing barriers, and recording progress toward your goal. This tool can be used to address any change you would like to make in your life, whether it is in the area of personal, physical, psychological, or financial well-being.

Instructions:

Choose a quiet time to complete the worksheet so that your attention is focused on the task at hand. Develop statements that will set the frame work for making a change (numbers 1–3). Answer questions about how you will operate within this framework (numbers 4–7)

1. Change I want to make:

2. My goal is:

Goal Writing Checklist:

- Do I have a time limit to reach this goal?
- Is the goal realistic?
- Is the goal specific?
- Can it be measured?

3. What steps do I have to take to achieve this goal? Write action steps below.

4. Who will help me accomplish my goal? How can he/she/they be helpful?

5. What will keep me motivated?

6. Have I tried to make this change before? ___Yes ___No If yes, what happened?

7. What are the barriers that might stop me from reaching this goal? How will I reduce the barriers?

8. How will I record progress in reaching my goal?

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