

Goal Setting

Fed up of failed New Year resolutions? We take a look at how you can make successful lifestyle changes and enjoy the journey!...

Welcome to a new year. As a time when we traditionally make resolutions for the year ahead we thought it would be a good idea to take a look at how to succeed at setting goals and ways of achieving those life changes you've always dreamt of. So let's start by taking a look at the planning process and the principles behind successful target setting.

Broken promises

Like many of us you may have vowed that THIS new year will see a new you. It's the time of year when many of us make promises to ourselves to change – to become better, healthier, thinner and more like we're told we ought to be. These promises are often broken within a few days, sometimes hours. My promise to go to the gym early in the morning was broken on the first day it opened after Christmas! After all it was dark and -9° outside - it seemed like such a good reason not to go

when I was nicely tucked up in my warm bed! But I did have this sense of failure later in the day. Why is it that so many of our well meaning pledges fall by the wayside so quickly? Let's take a closer look...

One of the main reasons is that we often don't think these resolutions through properly. We don't place them in the context of what's right for us as individuals. Often they consist of a long list of unrealistic targets that we think we ought to aim for. Each individual resolution often requires a major life change in itself, so stringing all your imperfections together and trying to resolve them in one fell swoop is just a recipe for disaster. Common promises made often include 'giving up smoking', 'losing weight', 'exercising more' and 'changing job'.

All of the above are major life changes, and to hope to be successful in them all at once is just wishful thinking that leads to demoralisation

and defeat when they fall by the wayside in quick succession. Together they're just too much to cope with, so it's a good idea to deal with big issues one at a time.

Increase the success rate!

There will be some, however, you can link together which will increase your chances of success in both – examples are giving up smoking and exercising, or losing weight and exercising. It's also psychologically beneficial to make positive goals. Your aim will be the same; the difference is simply in the language but it can make the difference between success and failure. For example 'I'm going to stop smoking from today,' is much more assertive than 'I'm not going to smoke if I can help it.'

Let's take losing weight and exercising as an example and see how we can set achievable goals that will ensure not only that we keep up the desire and momentum to fulfil that New Year's promise, but are also

successful at it. The same principles can be applied to any changes you'd like to make to your lives this year.

The first step is to ensure your goal is one that you really want and not what others say you should do. You'll only be successful if you really want it for yourself. Next, let's take a look at a common resolution made – 'I want to lose weight and start exercising'. That's a very woolly statement; it doesn't really give you a specific target to aim for does it? Not having a defined target to aim for makes it really easy to make excuses not to do anything and makes it difficult to get going as you've set no time period for it to happen in. This makes it so easy to put it off until tomorrow.

Make it specific

A much more successful resolution would be to say 'I aim to lose a stone by my summer holiday in June.' Giving yourself a specific weight target and the aim of looking good for a holiday or a particular event are an added incentive to achieving your goal, plus you've given yourself a time limit. Your exercise goal could be to aim for one hour of exercise four times a week by the end of March. These will be your broad targets. Now you need to look at them in detail.

After setting your goals, take a few days to analyse what they mean and what

they will entail. Research the methods of achieving them that are readily available to you – remember the more complicated you make it the more likely you are to fail. In the case of losing weight and exercising, learn about food and find out about local gyms, exercise or dance classes. Take a look at what's available in your area then decide what will work best for you. Remember – knowledge is power. However, set a firm time limit on this planning phase and don't use it as an excuse not to get started.

Well run businesses operate by setting targets and it's recognised that these goals need to be SMART. This is a simple acronym for successful goal setting. You can apply the same 'rules' to your personal goals and resolutions for a greater chance of success.

'S' stands for SPECIFIC – we've already discussed why the exact meaning of your goal needs to be clear. Once a goal becomes unclear, you'll start to make excuses not to continue.

'M' is for MEASURABLE. You need to know when you've reached your goal and also how to measure any success or setbacks along the way to enable you to change tactics if necessary. Reaching measurable goals gives much pleasure and a tremendous sense of achievement. It raises self esteem and confidence, too.

The most obvious way of measuring your weight loss goal is to weigh yourself every week. You'll be able to measure your progress and whether the methods you've put in place are successful. Those who visit the Forum regularly will know that we've set up a Healthy Eating Group to support those who'd like to lose weight. Some of our members have chosen a different way of measuring their goal – they've chosen to measure themselves for inches lost instead of pounds. This is an excellent way of gauging success particularly if you've a tendency to get obsessive about weight loss or gain.

You can measure your progress in exercise by the time, or the distance you're able to walk, run, cycle or swim, or by the weights you lift, or by the new dances you learn. It's a good idea to jot down how much better you feel about yourself as you progress towards your goal, too.

Making goals work

'A' is for ACHIEVABLE.

Your goal must be possible to achieve. This doesn't mean your goals should be easy, but it does mean that with effort and drive you stand a good chance of reaching your target. A good strategy is to work out what your long term goals are then to break this up into achievable amounts. For

example your long term goal may be to lose two stone by the end of the year. Looking at it in one big chunk like this sounds like hard work, but if you break it down into bite-sized portions, that's 28lbs in 11 months. So a good mid term goal could be to lose a stone by June 25th. This would make a monthly short-term goal of losing 2.8lbs per month from January 25th to June 25th and 2.3lbs a month between June and December. Better still why not stretch yourself a bit and round that figure out to 3lbs a month? That's just three quarters of a pound a week, so perfectly possible!

If you tell yourself 'I'm going to lose 3lbs a month between now and the end of the year,' you'll be much more likely to succeed than if you tell yourself 'I'd like to lose two stone this year.' You'll find yourself looking at the task in a more positive way and most importantly you're much more likely to be successful at it.

Think it through!

'R' is for REALISTIC. When you're setting your goals take into account the other demands on your time and energy. My promise of going to the gym early each morning was doomed to failure because going this early was very idealistic. I didn't take into account that I'm not a morning person – I just liked to think I was! Every day would have been

a struggle, which would have made success very unlikely. However having reviewed my goals I've made an appointment in my diary for lunch time sessions and this is working well.

At this stage you need to take your financial resources into account too. Joining a gym can be a financial burden so you need to make sure that it's right for you. Find a gym where you can join on a monthly basis to make sure it works for you. There are also lots of other ways of exercising which are free; brisk walking outdoors is a great way of getting fit. Some of you may prefer to join classes to exercise with others for company whilst some might prefer to exercise in the privacy of home to one of the many aerobic, Pilates or Tai Chi DVDs that are currently on the market. So it's important to think all the issues through before committing yourself.

'T' is for TIME-BASED. For a goal to be successful you need to know when it needs to be achieved by, so give yourself a deadline. Don't just pull a date arbitrarily out of a hat, though, give it thought and apply the other SMART guidelines. A deadline that's too tight will cause you stress and will probably fail, but if you give yourself too much time you'll find it difficult to start and keep putting it off because you've

'got plenty of time'. The ideal is to stretch yourself a little without causing pressure, so that when you successfully reach your goal, you'll feel a great sense of achievement and a boost in self esteem.

Keep it flexible

Once you've decided on your goals and the pathway to achieving them, write them down in a private notebook and add a little about why you decided on these specific targets and the feelings and emotions behind them. It's important to review your goals on a regular basis, perhaps once a month, so do this in the same notebook. This will enable you to take stock of your achievements as you progress. It will help you to realise how much you have changed over a period of time too. It may surprise you!

Six months from now you will have changed so the goals you're deciding upon now shouldn't be set in stone – they should be flexible. Almost certainly once you've started your journey towards your target you'll realise that perhaps you can achieve more, or perhaps other demands in your life mean that you'll need to adapt them to fit to changing circumstances. Keeping your goals flexible means that you're much less likely to fail, but beware don't use this as an excuse to downgrade your dreams or let them slide!