

Behavioral Goal Setting for Fitness/Weight Control

Adapted from the National Heart and Lung Institute

Put yourself in the best position to succeed by planning.

Set The Right Goals

Setting the right goals is an important first step. Most people trying to lose weight, for example, focus on just that one goal: weight loss. However, the most productive areas to focus on are the dietary and exercise changes that will lead to that long-term weight change. Successful weight managers are those who select two or three goals at a time that they are willing to take on, that meet the following criteria of useful goals:



Effective goals are 1) specific; 2) attainable; and 3) forgiving (less than perfect). "Exercise more" is a commendable ideal, but it's not specific. "Walk five miles everyday" is specific and measurable, but is it attainable if you're just starting out? "Walk 30 minutes every day" is more attainable, but what happens if you're held up at work one day and there's a thunderstorm during your walking time another day? "Walk 30 minutes, five days each week" is specific, attainable, and forgiving. In short, a great goal!

Goal setting and strategy is very similar to any project you have ever worked on at work. Your behavioral goals for yourself are like the smaller action items and steps you need to execute to move a project forward. Break your fitness improvement project into smaller, specific behavior goals, like:

- Get help laying out a 2 day per week strength program and do it all month
- Eat protein and veges for snacks twice per day all week
- Cook 2 healthy meals this week at home
- Find healthier desert choices for the next 2 weeks
- Begin using a heart rate monitor to track cardio workout intensity. Keep heart rate above 70% of my max during workouts.
- Use a pedometer and put at least 5000 clicks on it per day

Nothing Succeeds Like Success

Shaping is a behavioral technique in which you select a series of short-term goals that get closer and closer to the ultimate goal (e. g., an initial reduction of fat intake from 40% of calories to 35% of calories, and later to 30%). It is based on the concept that "nothing succeeds like success." Shaping uses two important behavioral principles: 1) consecutive goals that move you ahead in small steps

are the best way to reach a distant point; and 2) consecutive rewards keep the overall effort invigorated.

- Keep small daily and weekly goals for yourself in your food diary
- Keep no more than 2-3 goals going per week. Once you attain specific goal or goals, pick another one. "A goal attained, is a goal lost."

Success (But Not With Food)

Rewards that you control can be used to encourage attainment of behavioral goals, especially those that have been difficult to reach. An effective reward is something that is desirable, timely, and contingent on meeting your goal. The rewards you administer may be tangible (e. g., a movie or music CD or a payment toward buying a more costly item, new workout clothes) or intangible (e. g., an afternoon off from work or just an hour of quiet time away from family). Numerous small rewards, delivered for meeting smaller goals, are more effective than bigger rewards, requiring a long, difficult effort.

Balance Your (Food) Checkbook or Diary

Self-monitoring refers to observing and recording some aspect of your behavior, such as calorie intake, servings of fruits and vegetables, exercise sessions, medication usage, etc., or an outcome of these behaviors, such as weight. Self-monitoring of a behavior can be used at times when you're not sure how you're doing, and at times when you want the behavior to improve. Self-monitoring of a behavior usually changes the behavior in the desired direction and can produce "real-time" records for review by you. For example, keeping a record of your exercise can let you know quickly how you're doing, and when the record shows that your exercise is increasing and your performance improving, you'll be encouraged to keep it up. Some people find that specific self-monitoring forms make it easier, while others prefer to use their own recording system.

While you may or may not wish to weigh yourself frequently while losing weight, regular monitoring of your weight will be essential to help you maintain your lower weight. When weighing yourself remember that one day's diet and exercise patterns won't have a measurable effect on your fat weight the next day. Today's weight is not a true measure of how well you followed your program yesterday, because your body's water weight will change much more from day to day than will your fat weight, and water changes are often the result of things that have nothing to do with your weight-management efforts.

Avoid A Chain Reaction

Stimulus (cue) control involves learning what social or environmental cues seem to encourage undesired eating, and then changing those cues. For example, you may learn from reflection or from self-monitoring records that you're more likely to

overeat while watching television, or whenever treats are on display by the office coffee pot, or when around a certain friend. You might then try to sever the association of eating with the cue (don't eat while watching television), avoid or eliminate the cue (leave coffee room immediately after pouring coffee), or change the circumstances surrounding the cue (plan to meet with friend in non-food settings). In general, visible and accessible food items are often cues for unplanned eating.

Get The (Fullness) Message

Changing the way you go about eating can make it easier to eat less without feeling deprived. It takes 15 or more minutes for your brain to get the message you've been fed. Slowing the rate of eating can allow satiety (fullness) signals to begin to develop by the end of the meal. Eating lots of vegetables can also make you feel fuller. Another trick is to use smaller plates so that moderate portions do not appear meager. Changing your eating schedule, or setting one, can be helpful, especially if you tend to skip, or delay, meals and overeat later.