

# GOAL SETTING – BEGINNING TO TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR PAIN

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People in emotional or physical pain often feel sad, scared, frustrated, angry and lonely. These feelings can interfere significantly with important tasks and relationships. Enjoying meaningful activities and emotional closeness with people are critical for personal fulfillment and contentment. Without meaningful relationships and activities people suffer, often feeling hopeless and/or helpless to change their unhappy circumstances. Keeping a daily journal is a good way to bring clarity and relief to your experience by organizing and simplifying otherwise unclear, overwhelming hurt and pain. Recognizing patterns can help you decide what can be done to manage, reduce and transform the pain more quickly and comfortably than we might usually expect.

Another way to gain some control over the pain in your life is by setting goals which can bring order, success and warm, supportive relationships back into your life. Setting goals helps you commit yourself to this intention. If you are not used to setting goals, the process may be unfamiliar and challenging. The key to success is to set achievable goals – goals that you actually can and will accomplish. This is particularly important while you are learning how to live well despite your pain, because you certainly don't need to feel any more like a failure than you already do. You can learn by practice to be gently accepting and forgiving of yourself, your body and your circumstances by setting progressive goals that prevent failure. When you take the goal-setting process slowly and successively, each step will lead to further progress.

Writing a "first edition" of your long term goals in therapy before working out the steps necessary is one way to begin organizing your process of changes. This way you can work forward from where you are now: your starting place can be 1 on a 1 to 10 scale, with 10 meaning "How you intend to be on each goal" -- not perfect, simply good enough no longer to want or need therapy on that goal.

A different plan would be to consider three goals that you would really like to achieve. For physical pain, the goals should be short term ones that can be accomplished in one day to a few weeks. Middle and long term goals are also important; setting and accomplishing short term goals is a useful, even necessary, step toward learning to set and accomplish intermediate and long term goals.

The only things you can actually control are your own emotional and physical feelings, your own thoughts and habits of thinking, your own behavior and your own values and beliefs. Trying to control other people or anything outside



yourself & your perceptions, interpretations and responses to the world is impossible, and impossibly frustrating and depressing. Learning what I can and cannot control is usually a life-long process of re-learning and re-learning and re-learning these basic facts of life.

#### 5 Guidelines for Useful Goals:

1. A useful goal needs to be concrete and measurable, so you'll really know when you've reached your goal. At first, most folks need some help writing successive editions of goals that are concrete and measurable enough to be useful.
2. A useful goal needs to be realistic. Is it possible to accomplish, even while dealing with the pain?
3. A useful goal needs to be behaviorally defined. When I've reached my goal, what specifically will I be doing/thinking/feeling that's different from now? When you can see these things in your imagination, you can practice being these things in your everyday life. As you go along, you'll discover the steps and actions leading to your specific, measurable outcome.
4. A useful goal must be something you have, or can find, the freedom and power to accomplish on your own.
5. A useful goal must be very highly desirable for you to put forth effort necessary however long it takes.

For example, people often want to "feel less stressed." That sounds reasonable, but what exactly does it mean? "Feeling less stressed" has very different mind-body-spirit meanings to different people, so how can you specify what "feeling less stressed" means for you? This personal definition will help you identify behavior change(s), specific actions and steps to accomplish your goal. Success would be left to chance without these uniquely personal specifics.

Without measurable specifics and very strong motivation to change, your target would be a wish, not a goal. For example, your wish might be "to feel less stressed/better." A goal would be "since I'm now at 1 out of a possible 10 on Dropping Excess Anxiety, in 4 weeks I'll be at least a 2 or 3 through: 1] 30 minutes of exercise 6 days out of 7; 2] daily breath awareness and regulation exercises; and 3] daily written exercises from Feeling Good by David Burns. As you progress you'll become better and better able to describe the behavior(s) which demonstrate sufficient change/10.