Setting the Right Kinds of Goals

Chapter 4: Coaching

We've spent decades looking at goal setting and at how health and fitness coaches set goals with their clients. We concluded that coaches and their clients repeatedly commit the same three errors when it comes to establishing goals. The good news? It's relatively easy to turn these "bad" goals into "good" ones. You can do it with this three-step process.

STEP 1
Turn "outcome goals" into "behavior goals"

What are "outcome goals" and "behavior goals"?

An "outcome goal" is something you want to happen, such as losing a certain amount of weight, or running a certain time in a 5K.

A "behavior goal" is an action that you'd do or practice to move toward that outcome, such as putting down your fork between bites, or practicing your running technique three to four times a week.

Why not outcome goals?

While there's nothing wrong with wanting an outcome like a ower body weight, we often can't control outcomes because they're affected by so many outside factors.

Why behavior goals?

Behavior goals, on the other hand, allow us to focus on (and practice) the things we can control—actions, not end results.

What it looks like in practice

A client wants the outcome of "losing twenty pounds." However, to lose twenty pounds, they'll have to do certain behaviors like exercise regularly, better control calories, manage stress, and sleep well. So you turn those into goals.

For example, you might spend two weeks with the behavior goal of exercising four times each week for the next two weeks.

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Then, another two weeks with the behavior goal of eating slowly and until satisfied, not stuffed.

Then, another two weeks with the behavior goal of taking a five-minute break twice a day to do a mind-body scan.

And another two weeks with the behavior goal of practicing sleep-promoting calm down starting thirty minutes before bed. Notice how the goal is now an action, not an outcome.

Remember

There's nothing wrong with having a desired outcome. But the outcome is for you, the coach, to think about (and track). Your clients, on the other hand, should be thinking about (and tracking) the behaviors/practices that will lead to that outcome.

STEP 2
Turn "avoid goals" into "approach goals"

What are "avoid goals" and "approach goals"?

An "avoid goal" is something you don't want—something that pushes you away from your current pain, like "I don't want to be out of shape" or "I don't want to be on diabetes medication."

An "approach goal" is something you do want—something that pulls you toward a better, more inspiring future, like "I want to feel confident and strong" or "I want to live pain free."

Why not "avoid goals"?

"Avoid goals"—don't smoke, stop eating junk food—are psychologically counterproductive because telling someone to stop something almost guarantees they'll keep doing it. In addition, a flat-out "don't" reinforces the feeling of failure when someone messes up.

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Why "approach goals"?

"Approach goals," on the other hand, give clients something else to do when old habits might have otherwise kicked in. Plus they're about helping people feel good, successful, and inspired to keep on their journey.

What it looks like in practice

Instead of "no junk food," try focusing attention on eating more cut-up fruits and vegetables. Instead of "no soda," try focusing attention on drinking a glass of water with at least three meals each day. Instead of "no stress-eating," try focusing attention on stress-relieving activities to do instead of eating.

Remember

Writing down a habit you want to stop isn't enough. The key is to find a replacement your client can lean on when the old habit could kick in. For bonus points, write down why the new action is good for you. For example, "no soda" can be turned into "tea break," with the following: "Tea is calming, it has antioxidants, and there are lots of flavors I can try. I can even drink it in the mug my daughter made in pottery class."

STEP 3
Turn "performance goals" into "mastery goals"

What are "performance goals" and "mastery goals"?

"Performance goals" are a lot like outcome goals, but they're usually associated with external validation—wanting to win a competition for the prize money or wanting to beat a record time. You're shooting for a specific performance, particularly one that will give you kudos, applause, and/or something good to post on social media.

"Mastery goals" are about learning, skill development, and the intrinsic value of becoming excellent at something, or understanding something deeply.

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Why not performance goals?

These have limitations because so many things can influence performance like tough conditions or just feeling bad on race day. They can push you to achieve your best, of course. But they're de-motivating if you don't achieve them.

Why mastery goals?

Mastery is about the process of continued skill development, which almost always leads to better performance in the long run. Mastery also allows you to focus on the joy of learning, which is gratifying no matter what others think or what time the clock says.

What it looks like in practice

Say your client wants to set a half-marathon personal record. Well, that's both an outcome and a performance goal. To help them transform it into a mastery goal, you might consider working on running with a smooth, efficient stride and better controlling breathing. This could involve watching video of the client running, identifying technique elements to improve, and turning those into behavior goals.

Remember

Again, you can begin by writing down the performance objective. But don't stop there. Continue by listing the skills required to help achieve that objective. Then turn those skills into a series of behaviors. This process makes the goal about progression, not performance.

These activities and worksheets are taken from the book Change Maker: Turn your passion for health and fitness into a powerful purpose and a wildly successful career by John Berardi, PhD.

Check it out at: www.changemakeracademy.com/book