

Physical activity - setting yourself goals

Making any lifestyle change can be challenging. Many people find that having a goal in mind gives them something to work towards, motivates them to stay on track and provides a measure of how well they are doing.

If you're trying to become more physically active, realistic, well-planned goals keep you focused and motivated.

Remember to see your doctor for a medical check-up before starting any new fitness program, particularly if you are over 40 years, overweight, haven't exercised in a long time or suffer from a chronic medical condition.

Principles of goal setting

The main principles of effective goal setting include:

- Pinpoint your ultimate goal.
- Make your goals known to others.
- Work out the best way to achieve your goal.
- Break down your ultimate goal into small, specific and achievable mini-goals.
- Monitor your progress regularly.
- Include a reward in your goal-setting process. Plan for how you will benefit if you meet this goal.
- Adapt your goals to fit changing circumstances.
- Don't berate yourself or give up if you fall short.

Pinpoint your ultimate goal

Suggestions include:

- Be realistic. Your ultimate fitness goal could be to be fit enough to participate in a competition on a set date or to do 50 laps of the pool. Whatever the case, make this goal realistic. Remember that most of us will never be world-famous athletes or supermodels. Think about what is achievable for you. Write down your goals.
- Be specific. Don't make your ultimate goal a general statement like: 'I want to lose weight'. Make it measurable. Exactly how many kilograms do you want to lose?
- Choose a goal that is meaningful and important to you, not to anybody else. For example, if your partner wants you to lose weight, but you're happy as you are, you may find it difficult to commit to your exercise routine in the long term.

Find out how to achieve your ultimate goal

Once you have decided on your health and fitness goal, you need to consider how you will reach that goal.

Different fitness goals require different approaches. For example, weight loss requires you to regularly burn more kilojoules than you consume. An effective strategy may include:

- Choose aerobic activities such as walking.
- Exercise for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.
- Cut back on junk food.
- Eat smaller food portions.

- Increase the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats, low-fat dairy products and wholegrain foods in your daily diet.

Set small, specific mini-goals

You are more likely to reach your ultimate goal if you break it down into small, short-term goals. Short-term goals are specific, daily actions or behaviours that lead you to your ultimate goal.

Suggestions include:

You need to know your starting point, so you can pick activities that are comfortable and realistic for you, and build slowly at a pace that feels right for you.

Set a reasonable time frame. For example, if you want to lose 20kg, then a realistic weight loss of 1kg of body fat per week means that you need to allow yourself around 20 weeks.

Consider your exercise routines as mini-goals. For example, one mini-goal might be to exercise on all or most days of the week. Mini-goals should be set for every week or every fortnight. The more mini-goals you achieve, the more motivated you will become.

If you are unsure how to best achieve your particular fitness goals, ask an expert. For example, see your doctor, browse through the Better Health Channel fact sheets or consult an exercise physiologist, physiotherapist or appropriately qualified and certified personal trainer.

Monitor your progress regularly

Make your mini-goals measurable. Decide how you are going to monitor your progress and record every detail in a training diary. Suggestions include:

- Measure your progress in concrete ways. For example, if you are weight training, write down the weight and repetitions for each exercise. If you are exercising to lose weight, keep track of your weight loss.
- Choose appropriate ways to measure your progress. For example, bathroom scales don't distinguish between muscle and fat. It may be better to take your measurements with a tape measure.
- Find as many different ways to monitor your progress as you can and write down your progress regularly, such as once a week. For example, if you are exercising to lose weight, you might like to record your exercise sessions, daily diet and weekly measurements. Include incidental achievements like feeling more energetic or fitting into a smaller pair of jeans. Give yourself plenty of ways that you can succeed.
- Celebrate your progress.

Adapt to changing circumstances

Life can interrupt your training schedule. Suggestions include:

- Think about ways to cope with interruptions. For example, you may not be able to exercise in your usual way when on holidays, but you can always walk or use the hotel fitness facilities.
- If you get injured or ill, don't abandon your fitness goals. Instead, adjust your ultimate goal's time frame. Come up with micro-goals to keep you on track while you recover. For example, you may be too ill to exercise, but you can improve your diet. Write down these micro-goals in your training diary to keep up your motivation.
- If your fitness goal seems beyond you, set your sights a little lower, readjust your mini-goals and stay motivated.

Don't be too hard on yourself

Sometimes, you may find that your fitness goal is too ambitious. For example, maybe you are losing 0.5kg a week instead of 1kg. Suggestions include:

- The first few months of a new exercise program are always the most challenging. Adjust your short-term goals, persist and have faith that things will get easier with time.
- Celebrate your achievements, no matter how small. Making a commitment to a healthier lifestyle is a tremendous achievement, even if your fitness goal is a little harder to reach than you first thought. Flip back to the start of your training diary and appreciate how far you've come.

- Have a secondary fitness goal in mind. For example, if your ultimate goal is to lose 20kg, a loss of 15kg may be your secondary goal. Achieving this secondary goal is still a great success.
- Don't give up. You're worth the effort.

Where to get help

- Your doctor.

Things to remember

- Break down your ultimate health and fitness goal into small, specific and achievable mini-goals.
- Keep a training diary to monitor your progress.
- Always see your doctor for a medical check-up before starting any new fitness program, particularly if you are over 40 years, overweight, haven't exercised in a long time or suffer from a chronic medical condition.

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Physical Activity Australia

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