

S-O-S-S goals supplement

The following key points explore what is important when considering goals, and offer some ideas to get started.

The 4 key points are:

- 1. Selecting a direction or goal**
- 2. Options for change**
- 3. Settling on a plan, and**
- 4. Strengthening commitment**

Key point 1 - Selecting a direction or goal

Anyone who is motivated to achieve a goal is in some way unhappy or dissatisfied with their current situation. The reason we all choose to envision and pursue goals is because of a discrepancy or gap, between our current situation and our desired situation.

Therefore the first step in any goal directed behaviour is to have a clear idea of the direction or goal you want to move towards. In essence you need to be clear about what you want or what your desired situation would be. As previously discussed it is not vital to have a specific goal in mind, but what is important is that you know the direction you want to head in. Specifics can be incorporated at a later date.

The following questions are a good starting point for those that don't know what they want, or equally for those who suspect they know but aren't quite sure. Even if you do have a clear idea about the direction you want to move towards, or the goal you want to achieve these questions may still be useful.

- Think about your life now... How would you like things to be different?
- Given what you would like to be different... What exactly is it that you want to change?
- If you were successful in accomplishing what you want to change... What would be different?
- If you were to take things one step at a time... What do you think would be the first step?

It's important during this initial phase to think broadly about your direction or goal. By doing so you can evaluate whether your motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic, and from here you can deduce whether or not this would be a worthwhile pursuit. Remember that rushing into a decision around the changes you want to pursue is one of the most basic mistakes you can make. It would be pointless after all to put so much effort into something that you didn't truly want to do in the first place.

To assess how important this goal is and whether you are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to achieve it, ask yourself the following questions:

- On a scale of 0 - 10 how important is it that you achieve this goal or consistently head in this direction?
- How important do you think the same goal or direction will be in six months, one year or two years from now? What does your answer to this question tell you?
If it's not as important what are the factors that are making it important now? And are these factors valid? I.e. intrinsic or extrinsic
- If you were to remove yourself from your current environment, e.g. the people you know, the places you go etc. would your importance remain the same? If no why, and what does this tell you?
If importance would diminish what are the factors that are making it important now and are these valid? I.e. intrinsic or extrinsic

The need for a realistic direction or goal (as in what's realistic for YOU and not for others in general) is also another important consideration at this point. One way to evaluate whether your direction or goal is realistic is to use confidence ratings. Obviously if you had little confidence in your ability to achieve something, chances are you wouldn't achieve it. E.g. I want to run a marathon but I have never run for more than 20 minutes in the past and I don't know where to start!

Another way to explore whether your direction or goal is realistic is to explore the consequences that might result from taking a particular course of action. You might have the ability to follow through on a plan but if the consequences that resulted were negative, would you still do it? Would it be realistic that you did it? E.g. to train for a marathon would mean running for 2 hours 3-5 days a week after work. This is the time my wife is most busy and needs help with the kids.

The following questions will help you to gauge how realistic your direction or goal might be:

- On a scale of 0 - 10 how confident are you that you can achieve this goal or consistently head in this direction?
- How would your life be different (both the good and bad) while pursuing this goal or heading in this direction? Is this going to work for you?

Once a direction or goal has been established the next key point is to consider change options. However if you feel concerned about your importance and/or confidence levels you will most likely have more work to do before proceeding. To not deal with this now means you are most likely setting yourself up for failure. Remember, there's no rush!

If however you feel it's important that you do this, and you're confident you can do it, move on.

Key point 2 - Options for change

The next step after establishing your direction or goal is to consider how you are going to achieve it.

Brainstorming and considering possible change strategies is a great way to do this. Often when we think about changing we have one or more predetermined ideas of how we would go about it. This can be good assuming the ideas you have are worthwhile, but if not you could again be setting yourself up for failure, especially if these ideas haven't been successful in the past. Brainstorming is a great tool for looking outside of your 'go to' ideas as it generates a range of new options. It allows you to look at multiple possible solutions and draw on both new and past options, including those you might even consider farfetched, before moving towards a plan.

When brainstorming it is also best practice to consider the ideas in their totality as opposed to one at a time. Thinking about individual ideas invites you to consider what's wrong with them. This in turn has the possibility to strengthen counter-change arguments for why something won't work. Coming up with a menu of ideas on the other hand, puts you in a 'what could work', as opposed to a, 'why won't this work' frame of mind. It's really all about keeping things positive while still being realistic. As we all know, changing can be hard. At the early stages of change we can be derailed by the smallest negative comment or thought, so keeping things positive and forward focussed is far more productive.

The sequence of thinking should look something like the following...

- These are the various new ideas and possibilities that I've come up with, and these are ideas I've used in the past.
- Considering these ideas... Which of these do I prefer?
- Which out of these ideas do I think might work best for me at this point in time?

After establishing which options would suit your purposes the best, the next step is settling on a plan.

Key point 3 - Settling on a plan

After considering options for change, the process of planning begins. This is the point where you need to self-negotiate in order to come up with a plan for change that suits you best. The plan obviously needs to lead you towards your goals, and it must be realistic for you and your situation.

Ask yourself the following questions to get started...

- So I've considered all my options. What is it that I specifically plan to do?
- What do I think is the first step in carrying out this plan?
- How will I go about taking this first step? What will help, and what might get in my way?

Depending on how you like to do things, you might find it useful to fill in a written change plan which is essentially a summary of what it is that you plan to do. Writing something down is in many ways a formal commitment to follow through on a plan. Of course this is up to you, but for those of you thinking “I don’t think I will do this” consider the following:

Have you ever noticed that when you write a to-do list you can remember most or all of what’s on it without revisiting it? What about when you write down a great idea in the middle of the night out of fear you will forget it, only to find you remember it without referring to your note. Often the very act of writing something down helps to imprint it into long term memory. It solidifies your thoughts and gives you a clear image or idea that can be recalled at a later date. What you are working towards then becomes a clearly stated plan of action, as opposed to collection of thoughts and ideas.

Once you have completed your change plan, either mentally or by writing it down, it is then useful to summarise your plan. Doing this ensures it fits with your original direction and your intentions regarding how you want to get there. Doing this is not everyone’s preference, but if you choose to write this down it is always best to use language that is in keeping with you. Something you can understand and something that resonates with who you are. Look at the following summary example:

What I want is to feel healthier. I plan to do this by working on getting my weight and blood pressure down through diet and exercise. For me this is a much better alternative to medication. I want to do this for at least a month after which time I will make a doctor’s appointment to see if any progress has been made.

After looking into a number of possible exercise options I plan to join the local walking group and walk for 30mins three times per week. I am friends with the group organiser whom I will ring in the next day or two to organise my membership. I intend to do my first walk this Friday.

I also want to start eating healthier. Ultimately I would like to eat only healthy foods, but for now I am not totally ready to give up all of the things I like. What I have decided then is to try and cut out sugar, within reason, and be conscious of my portions. I will also enforce a 7.30pm cut off time for eating each night on weekdays.

Feeling healthier is my priority but nonetheless I will weigh myself every week on Monday morning. I will also keep a chart to monitor my exercise, weight and feeling of well-being.

Key point 4 - Strengthening commitment

An often neglected aspect of the change process, strengthening commitment is vital if you are to maintain on-going motivation and see your goals through to completion. It is in many ways the most important aspect to consider when attempting a change. So often people start with a bang only to lose motivation and quit shortly after starting.

If when thinking about change, you thoroughly consider the previous three key points, you should to some degree already be committed.

A simple way to gauge your commitment is to ask yourself the following question(s):

- On a scale of 0 - 10 how much do I really want to do this?
- Or simply... Is this what I want to do?

The answer is hopefully... Yes! It is.

When asking yourself this question it's important to differentiate between an assertive 'yes', and more tepid responses, such as 'I guess so', or 'I really should do this'. What you want is strong commitment to follow through with your plans. If you don't have this level of dedication at this point then more work is needed. To plough ahead with a change plan when you're only mildly committed would be setting yourself up for failure. If you still feel unsure then it is likely that something has either been missed or not thought about enough previously.

The following is a list of things you could try in order to strengthen your commitment to change:

- Explore any reluctance or ambivalence you still have about your direction, goal or plan in an attempt to resolve ambivalence.*
* *The 'Exploring and resolving ambivalence' resource can help with this.*
- Make yourself accountable to others by making your plan public. The more you verbalise your plans to others, especially those you care about, the more commitment is strengthened.
- Mobilise your support network. Getting others to help you, especially early on may be just the boost you need to get started and begin to form new habits.
- Go back over your plan so everything is crystal clear. Often when we are uncertain things seem overwhelming. Focussing on one or two steps that you can initiate immediately can also be helpful. Sometimes taking the first step can be hard but once we take it things start rolling. As I'm sure you've heard before, a journey of one thousand miles starts with a single step.

Most importantly, if after trying these suggestions you still feel you're not quite ready to make a commitment, simply stop and don't pressure yourself. Going ahead with a plan you're not that keen on will probably end badly. You have most likely experienced pressure in the past which has contributed to not following through on a plan. Remember again there is no rush. Especially if making this type of change is important to you. Trying half-heartedly and failing now will only strengthen your beliefs around not being able to change. Any setbacks at this early stage can very quickly lead to self-sabotage. Instead just keep the possibility of change in your mind and come back to making decision in a couple of days, or at another time where you feel more ready.