



Turning dreams into goals

What is a goal? A goal is an ambition or an idea of a desired future of something you would like to have or to be. This can be both physical and emotional. It might be that you would like to be fitter, healthier, more calm or perhaps achieve a promotion at work or that you would like to be more confident in some areas of your life.

Why have goals?

Whatever we might think, we all have goals. Some may be very specific, like completing a sporting event. Others might just be a certain way of living. Goals can often transcend from a destination to a constant value that orientates you through life, like being a compassionate friend, partner or parent. A friend of mine who is a landscape gardener told me that he felt *"this goal thing is all a bit woo woo"* and that all he wanted was to live a stress free life with as little disruption as possible. He was quite taken aback when I told him that was one of the most profound and challenging goals I had ever heard and that if that was truly what he wanted, then he better have a strategy!

Goals create meaning and purpose

From most of my learning, I have found that happiness is a derivative emotion of having meaning and purpose in our lives. Goals create forward direction and a state of "leaning in" ([see my post on Mindset](#)). They help navigate the inevitable challenges of life and keep us on track. Without goals, life can be like floating on water – you will just end up wherever the current takes you and that

could be heading straight for the waterfall! Being a little more organized, having some simple goals, supported by some planning, not only creates efficiency but directs focus, increases productivity and helps manage stress and supports positive mental wellbeing.

"Where focus goes energy naturally flows."

Goals can support the avoidance of regrets

Research from those who are near the end of their lives recorded some of the most common regrets...

- I wish I had lived the life I wanted rather than the one others wanted for me.
- Don't sleepwalk through life otherwise you will miss what is really important.
- I wish I had taken more risks.
- I wish I hadn't made work my life.
- I wish I hadn't lost touch with so many friends.

Understanding the importance of goals can help create and maintain a long and fulfilling life.

Be SMART...ERR

At this stage it would be remiss not to mention the acronym **SMART** when considering goals. It is considered a very relevant acronym and one of the most popular methods of goal planning which I have adapted and extended to **SMARTERR**.

Specific, helps define the goal. **Measurable**, provides quantifiable milestones. **Achievable**, provides a realism. **Relevant**, matches with your ultimate aims and ambitions. **Timely**, for focus. **Experiment**, being open to change. **Review** and **Reassess** aids progress – what's working and changes that may support the goal better.

Goals are only dreams until they are written down

Let's get writing. Take your time over several days. Try spending 30 minutes initially and then 10 minute blocks, listing everything down, in no particular order. Once all your thoughts are down on paper, go through them and start prioritising using the questions below – these will help focus on those goals with the most value as too many can be overwhelming and dilute motivation.

Choose three headings: career, personal and social.

Career – your goal might be that promotion, a higher salary or recognition for a project.

Personal – perhaps you'd like to travel more or get fitter and healthier. Studies suggest that a commitment to ongoing personal growth, like reading more books or learning a language, is essential for starting each day with energy, drive and focus.

Social – undoubtedly you will have a busy life and connecting with friends often goes by the wayside. However, taking time out to contact old friends, relatives and loved ones is so important. From much of the research around those that lead a long and healthy life, good social connection has been attributed a major factor.

The WHY question?

This is a fundamental question that I recommend to all clients – asking yourself why you have

chosen this particular goal helps establish the reason. Are the goals profound and significant? Do they support or contradict your own values and beliefs? Is the 'why' powerful enough to motivate and see you through the challenges?

Remove your buts!

Yeah but, no but! Now consider those elements that might create obstacles in the way of your goals. Realistically, what are they and what can you do to change or remove them? Really challenge yourself on each goal.

Are they moderately difficult?

To best optimize on all the benefits of having a goal, it is best if they are moderately difficult. Too easy and they won't have significant value and if too hard, the odds are stacked against achieving them. It is however useful if you have a little head start. For example, as a six foot four, fifteen stone middle aged man, it would be challenging to retrain as a jockey – not impossible, but not exactly giving myself the best start!

To help, consider the following questions for each goal on a scale of 1 – 10.

- What would it mean to achieve this goal?
- What would it mean if you didn't achieve this goal?
- Would achieving your goal be a life changing event?
- Are each of your goals in harmony with one another?



As you prioritise, move those that have scored low to another page on a secondary list. However, don't delete them as they may be worth coming back to.

Visualisation

Visualising doing an exercise (called Motor Imagery) has shown to increase muscle strength. Just think, you can sit in a chair and visualise yourself stronger! In a study of basketball players, one group visualised throwing the ball in the basket over and over again versus the other group who actually practiced. Afterwards, both groups competed to see who could get the most baskets and the group who visualised achieved a higher score. It is also interesting to note that we are twice as likely to achieve our goals if we visualise failure as we are hardwired to move away from pain more than towards pleasure.

Be careful, there is a difference between visualisation and pretending that you have achieved your goal which has a counter effect of reduced motivation as the brain thinks that you have already got there!

Timely

With your new priority list, place a time frame next to each goal. This needs to be realistic, but is important in creating focus. A goal is normally a future point in time – of course, they can be flexible but it is useful to have a time reference.

Make a plan

Probably one of the most important parts of achieving a goal is in the planning.

It is widely said that “*every one minute of*

If you don't have a plan for your life, you can bet someone else will find one for you!

planning is 10 saved in the execution”. A plan is like a thermostat, it predetermines the temperature of your achievements.

Don't worry, the plan doesn't have to be perfect. In fact, it is likely that it will be very imperfect, similar to when we set up our destination in the Satnav system in our car – our journey is changed because of traffic caused by unexpected events and a different route is chosen that will take you to the same destination but may take a little longer.

The execution

Start small – start with each goal and chunk it into small bite sized pieces.

What are the three things you can do to start your goal journey and what are the three things you would need to stop doing to support this goal?

For example, if you want to climb Mount Everest, start with buying a book, check out some associated sites and absorb yourself in the subject. If you are trying to learn a language, book an online lesson and sign up to do 10 minutes on an app like Duolingo and see how that feels. Connect with others that have achieved the same or a similar goal. What sort of traits do they have and how can you identify and learn from them? Inspiration is a contact sport!

The goal schedule

There is a great saying in time management that you don't *find* time, you *book* it!



This is where having a goal schedule is helpful. Designing a schedule to give you a regular routine is more effective than relying on motivation or willpower alone. When I was training for the London Marathon, I created a training schedule with fixed times. For some sessions, I had friends join me which created commitment and inspiration. A schedule takes away the self talk of negotiation and thinking, leaving action.

Choosing the right time to start

There are three daily time zones: Zone 1 – waking to midday; Zone 2 – midday to around 5pm and; Zone 3 – 5pm to bed time. When starting a new goal, it can be useful to optimise your natural biology and flow of hormones. In the morning, we have the highest levels of cortisol and norepinephrine hormones that support wakefulness and focus which makes us more able to tackle some of the more challenging tasks. As we move through the day, we are starting to shift hormones driving a state of more restful activities. Of course, this is a generalization and you will know your own flow.

“The best time to plant a tree is 10 years ago, the second best time is now.”

The right environment

A key factor to success is adapting your environment to match your goal. For example, if you are trying to avoid sugary snacks, clear out all the cupboards to make them less accessible. If you are looking to visit the gym in the morning, then pack all your stuff up the night before and pop it next to the front door.

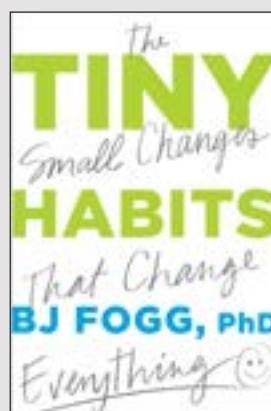
Be kind to yourself

We are only human and some days you are going to struggle. Remember, this is just one day and if you can, chunk your goal down into what I call “just one thing” – if a goal is to tidy your room, maybe choose one thing that you can move, clear away or throw. You will be amazed how often “just one thing” turns into a couple of things but even if it has been just one thing, I promise you will still have a sense of achievement.

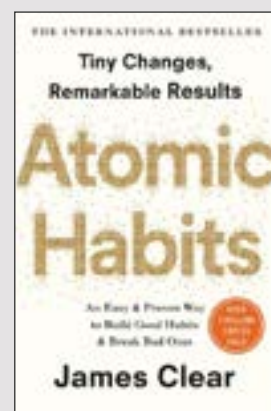
Have pleasure in the journey

As my mum once told me, goals are like life, much of the pleasure is often in the journey and not always the arriving. Research shows that it is often the pursuit of goals that creates much of the dopamine (the feel good hormone). Planning to engage and enjoy the journey is integral to keeping motivated.

RECOMMENDED READING



Tiny Habits
BJ Fogg PhD



Atomic Habits
James Clear



Goals
How to get the most out of life
Zig Ziglar