

## Self-Contract

### Goals

Exercise

10 min.

Client

No

Questionnaires distributed after health retreats often ask, 'Will you make a change in how you live your life as a result of attending this retreat?' Yes/No. If yes, what change(s) will you make? Commitment making is commonly regarded as an effective way to promote health behaviour change. The general idea is that when people commit to a certain behaviour, they adhere to their commitment, and this produces later behaviour change. The research literature on commitment to change indicates higher rates of success among people who commit to change than among those who do not (Mazmanian, Waugh & Mazmanian, 1997; Giné, Karlan, & Zinman, 2010; Baca-Motes et al., 2012), suggesting that commitment to change is an important predictor of actual change.

One way to establish commitment to change in therapy is behavioural contracting. Kirschenbaum and Flanery (1984) define a behavioural contract as "an explicit agreement specifying expectations, plans, and/or contingencies for the behaviour(s) to be changed". Behavioural contracting can be extensive, including short- and long-term goal setting, motivation for action, stage of change assessment, specific techniques to be implemented, and reward; alternatively, a behavioural contract can be as simple as stating a time by which one will make a desired change (e.g., "I will do X by [DATE]").

This tool is based on the concept of behavioural contracting, to help people act on their commitment to make a desired change. Given positive psychology has demonstrated that knowing and living by one's values contributes to mental health (Seligman et al., 2005; Frisch, 2006), values are incorporated into the exercise. The tool can be used with both individuals or groups who are ready to think about acting on a goal, plan, or decision.

### Author

This tool was adapted from Howard Kirschenbaum's Self-Contract exercise, seen in his 2013 book entitled 'Values Clarification in Counseling and Psychotherapy'.

### Goal

The goal of this tool is to help people act upon their commitment to make a desired change.

### Advice

- The Self-Contract is best set as a short-term exercise (i.e., lasting a day or a week at most). In this way, the client can begin to make small gains relatively quickly, which can help to build momentum while boosting self-efficacy.

- It is important to clarify that the contract is not between the client and the therapist; but between the client and him- or herself. Assure your client that you will be here whether or not he or she fulfils the contract.
- Guide your client to frame his or her contract in a way that is positive and approachable (i.e., to engage in some helpful behaviour) rather than negative and avoidance-based (i.e., to cease some unhelpful behaviour). For example, instead of committing to not eat junk food this evening, the client could commit to cooking a healthy meal for dinner.
- Formalise the contract by printing it out, and having the client physically sign it. This gives the contract an extra weight of importance, which may help the client stick to it, even at times he or she doesn't want to.



### Suggested Readings

Baca-Motes, K., Brown, A., Gneezy, A., Keenan, E. A., & Nelson, L. D. (2012). Commitment and behavior change: Evidence from the field. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39(5), 1070-1084.

Giné, X., Karlan, D., & Zinman, J. (2010). Put your money where your butt is: a commitment contract for smoking cessation. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 2(4), 213-35.

Frisch, M. (2006). *Quality of life therapy: Applying a life satisfaction approach to positive psychology and cognitive therapy*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Kirschenbaum, H. (2013). *Values clarification in counseling and psychotherapy: Practical strategies for individual and group settings*. Oxford University Press.

Kirschenbaum, D. S., & Flanery, R. C. (1984). Toward a psychology of behavioral contracting. *Clinical psychology review*, 4(6), 597-618.

Mazmanian, P. E., Waugh, J. L., & Mazmanian, P. M. (1997). Commitment to change: ideational roots, empirical evidence, and ethical implications. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 17(3), 133-140.

Seligman, M., Steen, T., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60, 410-422.

## Tool Description

### Instructions

The Self-Contract is a tool that can help you move towards your goals. The idea is to make a commitment to yourself to make positive, effective change in your life. The way it works is by stating a time by which you will make a desired change - i.e., "I will do X by [DATE]."

#### Self-Contract

Today's date:

I, *(your name)*:

will *(state your goal here)*:

by *(enter date here)*:

because doing so will help me move towards being the person I want to be—someone who:  
*(state personal reasons for making this change)*

Signature of contract maker:

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Upon completion, I will celebrate or reward myself by: