



3 GOAL ACHIEVEMENT EXERCISES

FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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Welcome

It is a great pleasure to offer you this compilation of exercises on goal achievement. During the past years, Positive Psychology has gained an increasing amount of attention, both from helping professionals and researchers. This attention has resulted in many valuable insights in what contributes to a happy, fulfilling life. In addition, positive psychology has given us many tools not only to flourish, but also to cope with difficult times in life.

Since 2013, our aim with PositivePsychology.com has been to contribute to this field by disseminating the science to psychology practitioners and educators alike.

We hope that the tools presented here may inspire you too to increase your own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the people around you. Please feel free to print and share this document with others.

For those who like what they see, make sure to also check out our online searchable database with all kinds of practical positive psychology tools:

<https://positivepsychology.com/toolkit/>


All the best!


Seph Fontane Pennock
Hugo Alberts, Ph.D.



Advanced Goal Analysis

Goals

 Exercise

 20-30 min

 Client

 No

The formulation of a goal is an important first step in the process of its achievement. Research has shown that goals can be classified along several dimensions and that these dimensions can help explain why some goal formulations contribute to well-being and performance and others do not (or to a lesser degree). The first dimension along which goals can be classified is proximity. While short-term goals can be accomplished within a relatively short time, long-term goals require long term investment and commitment (Stock & Cervone, 1990). The second dimension is the goal specificity. While specific goals have a clearly defined end-state (e.g., losing five pounds), nonspecific goals are ambiguous or diffuse in the exact level of performance that is required to achieve them (e.g., losing some weight) (Hollenbeck & Klein 1987; Wright & Kacmar 1994). The third dimension that can be used to classify goals is action orientation. Approach goals are focused on moving towards a positive outcome (e.g., passing the exam) whereas avoidance goals are expressed as a movement away from an undesirable state (e.g., not failing for the exam) (Elliot and et al. 1997; Elliot & McGregor, 2001). The fourth dimension involves the purpose of goals. A distinction can be made between learning goals, the purpose of which is to develop or acquire an attribute, such as a specific task skill or knowledge, and performance goals, the purpose of which is to validate personal attributes, such as ability, and seek positive evaluations of those attributes from others (Dweck, 1999). The final dimension is the duration of involvement that is needed to achieve the goal. End-state goals are goals that, once achieved, do not require additional action (e.g., publishing an article). Process goals, on the other hand, are goals that require continuous action (e.g., staying healthy). In this tool, clients use these five dimensions to a) analyze their goal formulations and, b) when needed, transform unhelpful goal formulations into more helpful ones.



Goal

The goal of this tool is for clients to examine their goal formulations and replace unhelpful or ineffective goal formulations with better alternatives.



Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.).



Advice

- This tool can be used not only with clients who have already set goals but also with clients who struggle with setting goals. For the latter group of clients, the advice about goal formulations (Appendix D) can serve as a useful starting guide helping them set effective goals.
- Clients need to realize that not all goals can always be classified along the five dimensions. For example, the goal “booking a vacation for next summer” is neither a learning goal nor a performance goal. The purpose of this tool is not to force clients into making arbitrary categorizations but rather to make them aware of how goal formulations can be analyzed and improved.
- This tool may also serve as a guide for practitioners, helping them assist clients in the formulation of their goals during therapy or coaching.



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Advanced Goal Analysis

Step 1: List your goals

List up to 7 goals that you are currently pursuing. This can be small goals or large goals, anything that you are aiming to accomplish. Use the form in Appendix A to list your goals. An example of a completed form is shown in Appendix F.

Step 2: Understanding the different types of goals

Goals can be categorized along different dimensions. Take, for instance, specificity. Goals differ in how specific they are. While some goals are very specific (e.g., “I want to lose 5 pounds”), others are rather vague (“e.g., I want to lose some weight”). The table displayed in Appendix B provides an overview of the most important dimensions along which we can categorize goals. Take some time to study the table.

Step 3: Goal analysis

Now that you have learned about the different types of goals, let us take a look at the list of goals that you made in step 1.

Consider the five goal dimensions explained in step 2. Using these five dimensions, indicate which type of goal best matches each of your personal goals. Is it short-term or long-term? Approach or avoidance? Learning or performance? Use the scoring form shown in Appendix C. For each goal, put an X in the column that corresponds with the type of the goal. If you find it difficult or impossible to categorize a goal along a certain dimension, you can decide to leave this dimension open. An example of a completed form is shown in Appendix G.

Step 4: Goal evaluation

Each type of goal has benefits and drawbacks. While some types of goals should be avoided (such as vague goals), other types of goals work best in particular situations or particular combinations. By understanding the pros and cons of the different types of goals, you can formulate goals in a way that is most likely for them to become realized.

In this step, you are going to examine step 3 of your goal analysis and determine how effective and helpful each goal is. Look at the table displayed in Appendix D. This table provides an overview of all the benefits and drawbacks of each type of goal, including advice.

Use this table to evaluate each of your personal goals. Now that you have analyzed and evaluated them, are there goals that could be improved? You may think of reframing these goals, combining them with other goals, or maybe even abandoning them. Use the form in Appendix E to list each goal that can be improved below and briefly describe how you might improve them.

Appendix A: Your personal goals

Goal #1

Goal #2

Goal #3

Goal #4

Goal #5

Goal #6

Goal #7

Appendix B: Different types of goals

| Dimension | | Type of goal | Description | Example |
|-------------------------|-------------|--|--|---------|
| proximity | short-term | This goal can be achieved in the near future | "Tomorrow, I will write chapter X." | |
| | long-term | This is a goal one envisions for the distant future. | "At the end of this year, I have written two books." | |
| specificity | Clear | These goals have a clearly defined end-state. | "I will write 1 chapter." | |
| | vague | These goals are ambiguous or diffuse in the exact level of performance that is required to achieve them. | "I will do some writing." | |
| action-orientation | approach | These goals are defined as being focused on moving towards a positive outcome. | "I will finish writing chapter 4." | |
| | avoidance | These goals are defined as being focused on moving away from a negative outcome. | "I will try to avoid not finishing chapter 4." | |
| purpose | learning | These goals have the purpose of developing or acquiring an attribute, such as knowledge or skills. | "I will complete this course so that I can improve my writing skills." | |
| | performance | These goals have the purpose of validating personal attributes, such as ability, and seeking positive evaluations of those attributes from others. | "I will complete this course cum laude so that others will praise me." | |
| duration of involvement | process | These goals require continuous action. | "I will write three pages every day." | |
| | end-state | These goals, once achieved, do not require additional action. | "I will finish writing this book." | |



Appendix C: Goal analysis form

| | Proximity | | Specificity | | | action-orientation | | | purpose | | | duration of involvement | |
|--------|------------|-----------|-------------|-------|----------|--------------------|----------|-------------|---------|-----------|--|-------------------------|--|
| | short-term | long-term | clear | Vague | approach | avoidance | learning | performance | process | end-state | | | |
| Goal 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Goal 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Goal 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Goal 4 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Goal 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Goal 6 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Goal 7 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Appendix D: Advice per type of goal

| Dimension | | Type of goal | Pro's | Con's | Advice |
|-------------|------------|--------------|---|--|---|
| proximity | short-term | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + allow for detailed planning + increase persistence + build self-confidence + manageable + easy to monitor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - less motivating than long-term goals - achievement can result in the sense of premature self-congratulation and encourage relaxation rather than continued effort | <p>Combine both short-term and long-term goals. Short-term goals will help you stay on track and build confidence. The magnitude of long-term goals will inspire you to keep striving for them.</p> |
| | | long-term | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + allow for flexibility in planning + more motivating than short-term goals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - hard to monitor progress - lack of "small success" experiences | |
| specificity | clear | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + more commitment + more consistent performance + easy to accurately evaluate the performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - perceived as more difficult - perceived as less attainable | <p>Although there are benefits attached to vague goals, it is recommended to make goals as clear as possible, as this makes monitoring progress, a key component of effective goal accomplishment, easier.</p> |
| | | vague | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + perceived as less difficult and more attainable + less likely to generate feelings of failure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - less commitment - greater variability in performance - difficult to accurately evaluate the performance | |

| Dimension | Type of goal | Pro's | Con's | Advice |
|--------------------|--------------|---|---|---|
| action-orientation | approach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + more motivating + higher levels of performance + desirable outcomes elicit excitement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - may feel unnatural to people who are afraid of failure and rejection | Some researchers suggest that action-orientation is a personal matter: Pursuing approach goals may be more feasible for approach-oriented individuals, whereas pursuing avoidance goals may be more feasible for avoidance-oriented individuals. However, in general, pursuing more approaches than avoidance goals is associated with higher levels of well-being. Moreover, the benefits of approach goals seem to outweigh the benefits of avoidance goals. Therefore, it can be regarded as more helpful to formulate approach goals . |
| | avoidance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + desirable outcomes elicit calmness and relief | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - negative outcomes - poor well-being - harder to monitor - result in more negative thoughts | |



Appendix E: Goal evaluation

Goal number:

Brief description:

Could be improved by:

Goal number:

Brief description:

Could be improved by:

Goal number:

Brief description:

Could be improved by:



Goal number:

Brief description:

Could be improved by:

Goal number:

Brief description:

Could be improved by:

Goal number:

Brief description:

Could be improved by:



Appendix F: Examples of personal goals

Goal #1

Finishing my report about strategic collaboration at work

Goal #2

Learning to speak Spanish

Goal #3

Booking a vacation for next summer

Goal #4

Not getting negative feedback during my next presentation at work

Goal #5

Staying healthy

Goal #6


Getting a 10K USD bonus at the end of the year

Goal #7

Preventing my oldest son from to repeat the class

Appendix G: Example of completed goal analysis form

| | Proximity | | | Specificity | | | | action-orientation | | | purpose | | | duration of involvement | |
|--------|------------|-----------|-------|-------------|----------|-----------|----------|--------------------|---------|-----------|---------|---|---|-------------------------|---|
| | short-term | long-term | clear | vague | approach | avoidance | learning | performance | process | end-state | | | | | |
| Goal 1 | X | | X | | X | | | X | | | | | | | X |
| Goal 2 | | X | | X | X | | X | | | | | | X | | |
| Goal 3 | X | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | X |
| Goal 4 | X | | | X | | X | | | | X | | | X | | X |
| Goal 5 | | X | | X | X | | X | | | | | X | | | |
| Goal 6 | | X | X | | X | | | | | | | | X | | X |
| Goal 7 | | X | | X | | | X | | | X | | | | | X |

 **Goals** Exercise 15 min Client No

Goal Visualization

Mental imagery of future events (also known as mental simulation, goal visualization, and imagined future) is a technique that helps people “envision possibilities and develop plans for bringing those possibilities about” (Taylor et al., 1998, p. 429). Such an exercise has been shown to promote goal-directed behavior by increasing one’s expectation for success, enhancing motivation and emotional involvement, and initiating planning and problem-solving actions. Mental imagery can be outcome-focused, where images of the outcomes or goals are generated, or process-focused, where images of the steps leading to outcomes and goals are generated. Outcome-focused imagery can help one envision the desired outcome and identify specific and concrete plans. Process-focused imagery guides one to visualize the process through which a goal will be attained and, in turn, form action plans for goal pursuit.

Research has examined the beneficial effects of imagining future events. For instance, mental imagery of possible selves (i.e., where one generates images of what he or she could become) has been shown to enhance motivation by helping people identify goals and develop goal-directed behavior (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006) and improve performance through imagining one’s future success (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Furthermore, social cognition research has found that mental imagery of future events increases the likelihood that those events will occur (Johnson & Sherman, 1990). Furthermore, mental imagery has been shown to enhance athletic performance, improve impulsivity, reduce relapse rates among alcoholics, and reduce premature termination of therapy (Johnson & Sherman, 1990).



Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



Goal

The goal of this tool is to promote goal-directed behavior by increasing the client’s expectation for success, enhancing motivation and emotional involvement, and initiating planning and problem-solving actions.



Advice

- It is important to remember that not every wish or desire that the client has for him or herself will have motivational benefits. People who tend to be pessimistic may become less motivated when visualizing their future success.
- Encourage the client to focus on positive mental images that include precisely how he or she will attain the desired outcome, rather than exclusively on the outcome itself.
- Encourage the client to cultivate a mental image that is based on positive expectation (i.e., the belief that the imagined future event is attainable) rather than positive fantasy (i.e., idealized images of desired events that are experienced regardless of their likelihood of occurrence), as the positive expectation is more motivating.



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Goal Visualization

Instructions

Step 1: Guide the client through the exercise using the following script

To begin, take a moment to get comfortable in your seat and gently close your eyes. Take a few deep, slow breaths, and allow yourself to relax. I am going to speak to you for the next little while, and all you need to do is listen and imagine. Do your best to avoid falling to sleep. Simply relax and imagine.

OK, I would like you to think about a goal that you want to accomplish in the next year of your life. This might be a relationship goal, an educational goal, a personal goal, or a work-related goal. Take a moment to bring this goal forward and visualize it in your mind's eye.

(30 secs)

Now, with this personal goal in mind, I would like you to imagine yourself going forward in time into the future... going forward one week... two weeks... three weeks....

And four weeks... it's now one month into the future, and you have started working towards achieving your goal - you are on the road to success. What decisions have you made? What actions have you taken? How does it feel to be on this road to success?

(30 secs)

Now, using your imagination, continue going forward in time... until you are 6 months into the future. You are significantly closer to achieving your goal. You are starting to feel the benefits of all your efforts. What does it feel like? How does it feel to be this much closer to your goal? Allow yourself to notice any feelings or emotions tied to this moment.

(30 secs)

Now, I would like you to continue going forward in time until you reach one year from now. Here, you have fully accomplished your goal. You have achieved success! Visualize yourself in your mind. Where are you, and what are you doing? Who are you with, if anyone? What are people saying to you? What are you saying to them?

(15 secs)

How does reaching your goal feel? What emotions are tied to this achievement? Perhaps there are feelings of pride, joy, contentment, or satisfaction.

(30 secs)



Now, I would like you to look back on your journey. Look back on the process of achieving this goal. Look back on all your hard work and effort, and consider how you reached your goal, step-by-step. What were the little things you did, day-by-day, to achieve success? What did you do at work? What did you do in your relationships?

(15 secs)

What did you do internally to achieve success? How did you manage difficult thoughts and emotional obstacles? What coping strategies did you use? Take a moment to consider all the things that helped you manage the personal challenges that appeared along the way.

(30 secs)

Good.

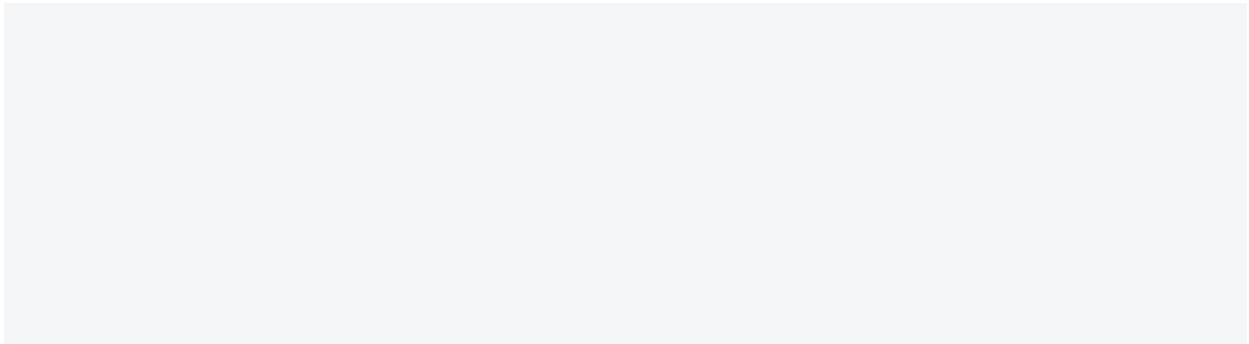
Now, as the exercise comes to an end, take a deep, slow breath. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Step 2: Evaluate the exercise

How was it to do this visualization?

Is there anything you learned from this exercise?

Are there any insights that you can use to move closer to your goals? If so, list them below:



Realizing Long-Lasting Change by Setting Process Goals

Goals

 Intervention

 5-10 min

 Client

 No

Goals differ in the duration of involvement that is needed for achievement. In general, a distinction can be made between end-state goals and process goals (Frese & Zapf, 1994). End-state goals are goals that, once achieved, do not require additional action. An example of an end-state goal is publishing an article. Once the goal of publishing an article is accomplished, the author does not need to spend any more time on this goal and can pursue another goal. End-state goals thus represent a one-off or momentary change. Process goals, on the other hand, are goals that require continuous action. An example of a process goal is staying healthy. To reach this goal, an individual is required to continue performing certain actions, such as eating healthily every day and going to the gym twice a week. Thus, process goals involve long-lasting change. In most cases, process goals can be conceptualized as standards that should be maintained, such as working hard, maintaining certain body weight, being kind to others, and many others.

Many clients set end-state goals when their desired change actually requires setting a process goal. Consider a client who wants to lose weight. When asked to translate this wish into a goal, the client answers, “My goal is to lose 15 pounds.” The problem with this goal is that the desired outcome is framed as a momentary change, while the true desired outcome is, in fact, a long-lasting change. After all, the client’s intention is probably not to lose 15 pounds and then start gaining weight again. Rather, the goal is to maintain weight loss. Therefore, it would be more helpful for the client to reframe this goal into a process goal, such as “My goal is to keep healthy body weight.” The consequence of setting this process goal is that the attention automatically shifts to the “keep” part of the goal. Which form of repeated action is needed to stay at a healthy body weight? Instead of setting a goal to lose 15 pounds, the client may now decide to set a goal to exercise for 10 minutes every morning. The ongoing process goal is more likely to lead to the formation of a habit that will enable the client not only to lose 15 pounds but also to stay at this intended body weight. This tool was designed to aid clients in the formation and pursuit of process goals.



Author

This tool was created by dr. Hugo Alberts.



Goal

The purpose of this tool is to help clients build habits that will result in long-lasting change using the formulation of process-goals.



Advice

- A powerful way to remind clients of their process goals is by using visual cues as a reminder. For example, a client who decides to write daily to finish his book can be reminded of this habit by a postcard of a book that is placed where it can be seen every day (e.g., on the refrigerator or office desk). Exposure to this card serves as a prime or reminder for engaging in the habit of writing daily.
- Clients are often aware of temptations that prevent them from reaching their goals. In many cases, clients visit a practitioner because their past attempts at reaching a certain goal were unsuccessful. Together with the client, the practitioner is advised to analyze these past failed attempts and carefully examine those temptations that contributed to unsuccessful goal pursuit. Using this information, the practitioner can help clients build routines that minimize or eliminate exposure to these temptations. For example, a client who indicates that his past attempts to increase productivity at work often failed because he/she was interrupted often may now decide to turn off his phone and email for fixed hours during the day.
- Clients often tend to underestimate the value of making small improvements daily. They falsely believe that to reach their goals, they have to take rather drastic forms of action. Consequently, they often experience a fear of failure or notice that it is simply impossible to keep performing these drastic actions. The practitioner is advised to assist clients in adopting a mindset that is focused on making incremental changes by making them aware of the influence that these changes can have over time. For instance, the practitioner may track the client's progress towards the goal and devote ample time to discuss the total amount of progress made so far. In this way, the client's sense of self-efficacy is strengthened, and the motivation to continue is boosted.
- When one habit has been realized through small, incremental steps, another habit can be developed on top of the existing one that is supporting the same process goal. For example, if the client has formed a habit of exercising daily, the elimination of soda out of his or her diet can be added to the existing habit. This method of gradual improvement prevents a client from quitting due to feeling overwhelmed and increases chances of lasting behavioral change.
- Keep in mind that the formation of new habits takes time. Research findings suggest that the time it takes to build a habit can vary from 18 to 254 days (Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010).



References

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Realizing Long-Lasting Change by Setting Process Goals

Instructions

In this exercise, we are going to explore a powerful way to help you to realize your goals, namely by building habits. Please use Appendix “My Habit Creation Plan” to register your answers.

Step 1: Choose a goal

Consider something you would like to change for good; some goal that would involve a long-lasting change. Perhaps you would like to feel more energized during the day or become and stay healthier. Formulate this goal in Appendix under “My goal.”

Step 2: Choose an action

Now let's focus on what is needed to realize this change. Think of the following question, Which action, if carried out repeatedly, would help you reach this goal? Try to think of things you could do rather than things you should no longer do. List this action in Appendix under “Action.”

Step 3: Choose an approach

The secret to long-lasting change is the creation of habits. We create habits when we do the same thing repeatedly. New habits can be built in different ways. Consider the following three approaches.

Drastic change

The most rigorous way to build habits is to drastically change your behavior from the start. For example, if you wish to improve your health, you may decide to start exercising for 1 hour daily. Or, if you aim to write a book, you may decide to write 2,000 words daily. This “all-or-nothing” approach to habits is often used when we want to get rid of undesirable habits, such as smoking or drug abuse, when we try to quit these habits ‘cold turkey.’ Rather than gradually reducing the habit, you aim to create the habit of not engaging in the problematic behavior any more at all. A common problem with this approach is that it is often difficult to maintain such a drastic behavior change.



Gradual change

A less rigorous approach to habit building is using gradual change. This means that you start with a low dose of the desired behavior and gradually increase the frequency or duration of the behavior. For example, if you set the goal of meditating for 40 minutes a day, you may start with 2 minutes per day for the first week, then for 5 minutes the second week, and so on, until the desired 40 minutes of daily meditation is achieved. Likewise, if you aim to build a new habit of non-smoking, you may start with one cigarette less each day for the first week and then gradually reduce the number of cigarettes each week until no cigarettes are smoked anymore.

Chunking

Finally, habits can be built using a “chunking” approach. Here, you move closer to your goal by carrying out the desired behavior in smaller chunks for a longer period. For example, to reach the goal of writing a book, you may decide to write for 20 minutes every day. Or, if you aim to become an expert on a given topic, you may decide to spend 15 minutes per day reading on this topic. The different approaches to habits are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Different habit-formation approaches

| Approach | Description |
|--------------------|---|
| Drastic change | drastically changing your behavior in an ‘all-or-nothing’ fashion |
| Incremental change | starting with a low dose of the desired action and gradually increasing the frequency or duration of the action |
| Chunked change | steadily engaging in smaller doses of the same desired action for a longer period |

Which of the aforementioned habit-building approaches seems most attractive and workable for you? Consider the action you listed in step 2. Think of how you could use this particular approach to make this action a part of your daily or weekly routine. How, specifically, could you carry out this behavior? How often? How long? On which days? Try to be as specific as possible.

Step 4: Start taking action

Start by carrying out the plan you described in step 3. Remember, no matter how small your action may seem, the most important thing to remember is that you are taking action. Building habits requires patience. It takes time for your new habit to evolve. Give it time. Try not to be discouraged if you fail to stick to your original plan. You can always pick up where you left off. The trick is to focus on the fact that you are moving closer to your goal, not on how far you are removed from your goal. Keep moving.



Appendix: My Habit Creation Plan

My goal

This is what I want to change for good:

Action

This action, if performed regularly, will help me realize this goal:

My plan

This is how I am going to create this new habit and realize my goal: