

Setting Goals and Developing Action Plans

Type of Contributions: Handout/Activity

Objective

This handout/activity has three primary objectives:

- To provide clients with specific suggestions for setting personal goals both inside and outside of therapy
- To provide clients with suggestions for developing action plans to achieve those goals
- To provide clients with a structured method for setting goals and developing action plans.

Rationale for Use

Many therapy clients attempt to set goals for themselves (both inside and outside of therapy), but they often do so in an informal and unsystematic way which limits their ability to achieve their goals. This handout/activity provides clients with a systematic method for setting goals and developing action plans that can greatly enhance their ability to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. Use of this activity in the therapy setting offers several potential benefits, both to the client and to the therapist. The activity will help the client develop skills which will enable him or her to make optimal use of therapy and which will continue to be useful after therapy has been terminated. This activity benefits the therapist by helping him or her to establish a therapeutic alliance with the patient as they collaborate in the goal-setting process and by providing some structure for therapy sessions.

Instructions

This activity works best when the handout found at the end of this chapter is discussed with the client in a therapy session, then given to the client for homework. In that next session, the therapist should discuss with the client the goals and action plans the client has formulated, responding to the client's questions about the process of setting goals and developing action plans, and addressing any difficulties that client experienced in completing the handout. If the client has not effectively utilized the guidelines provided in the handout (i.e., has not set goals that are specific, challenging, measurable, etc.), the therapist can provide suggestions for revising the goals and action plans. A portion of some or all of the subsequent therapy sessions with the client can then be devoted to discussing the client's progress toward the goals he or she has established, how to deal with obstacles standing in the way of goal achievement, etc.

If the therapist wishes, this goal-setting process can also include a component that is tied more directly to the therapy process itself, e.g., when the therapist initially gives the handout to clients to complete, the therapist can assign the clients to set some goals that they would like to accomplish in therapy in addition to goals they are setting for other areas of their lives. In the next session, the therapist and client can discuss these goals for therapy, make any indicated revisions or additions to the therapy goals, and then use the agreed upon goals as a structure for subsequent therapy sessions. This collaborative process can increase therapeutic alliance and can increase the client's commitment to the therapeutic alliance and can increase the client's commitment to the therapy process.

Suggestions for Follow-Up

The therapist can, in subsequent therapy sessions, revisit the goals and action plans the client has set in order to respond to problems the client is experiencing in working toward those goals, check on the client's progress toward those goals, and provide positive reinforcement to the client for efforts toward meeting his or her goals. If the therapist has used the handout to collaborate with the client in setting goals for the therapy process itself, those goals can be used to structure the therapy process, with sessions being primarily devoted to working towards the agreed upon goals.

Setting Goals and Developing Action Plans

Therapy provides you with an excellent opportunity to examine your goals in life and what you hope to accomplish in the future. Maybe there are some goals that you have had for a long time, but have not made as much progress toward as you would like. Maybe there are some new goals that you would like to set for yourself. This handout is intended to provide you with some guidelines for setting effective goals and some suggestions for developing and implementing systematic plans for achieving those goals.

I. Setting Effective Goals

Suggestions for setting effective goals include the following:

- *Make your goals as specific and concrete as possible, and include deadlines for achieving the goals.* When setting your goals, consider such questions as What? When? How often? How long? For Example, "I want to lose ten pounds by June 1" is a better goal than "I want to lose some weight."
- *Make sure that you can measure progress toward your goal.* Otherwise, you will have no sure way of knowing whether your efforts are yielding any results. An example of a measurable goal is "I want to save \$1000 by the end of the year." This is measurable because it is stated in specific numerical terms (number of dollars). During the year, you can check your progress towards this goal by simply checking the balance in your saving account.
- *Set challenging, but realistic goals.* Setting extremely difficult goals can lead a person to get frustrated and give up on his or her goals; setting extremely easy goals does not lead to significant self-improvement and does not tend to produce a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction. therefore, the best goals are one that are challenging (that is of medium difficulty) and also realistic (achievable, rather than impossible).
- *Choose goals that are truly important to you.* If you set goals that you do not feel are really important or worthwhile, you are unlikely to put in the time and effort needed to achieve those goals.
- *Set goals for a variety of time frames* (For example, you might set daily goals, weekly goals, monthly goals, goals for the year, for the next three years, etc.). The questions listed below are intended to help you do this.
- *Set goals in a variety of life areas* (for example, job/career goals, financial goals, personal growth goals, health/fitness goals, education/training goals, therapy goals, etc.).
- *Avoid setting too many goals at once.* Base the number of goals you set on an assessment of how many goals you can realistically, rather than ideally, pursue. Setting a few goals and making steady progress toward them is better than setting a large number of goals that end up being forgotten or abandoned.

Keep these suggestions in mind as you answer the following questions.

1. What is a goal that you would like to accomplish today?
2. What goal(s) would you like to accomplish in the next week?
3. What goal(s) would you like to accomplish in the next month?
4. What goal(s) would you like to accomplish in the next six months?
5. What goal(s) would you like to accomplish in the next year?
6. What goal(s) would you like to accomplish in the next three years?
7. What goal(s) would you like to accomplish in the next five years?
8. What goal(s) would you like to accomplish in the next ten years?
9. What goals would you like to accomplish in this lifetime? A useful way to think about this is to imagine that you are 70 or 80 years old, nearing the end of your life, and that you are reflecting back on your life. At that point, what things would you like to be able to say you have accomplished in your life?

II. Developing and Implementing Action Plans for Achieving Your Goals

After you have set some goals, the next thing you need to do is to develop and implement action plans for achieving those goals. Suggestions for doing this include the following:

- *For each goal, brainstorm methods of achieving that goal.* Brainstorming involves generating as many ideas as you can and writing all of these ideas down as they come to you, no matter how foolish or unrealistic some of the ideas may seem. Do not evaluate or criticize the ideas as they come to you; simply write them down. After you have generated several ideas, THEN you can analyze them and evaluate them. Ask yourself such questions as: "How realistic is this method? What skills/resources/information would I need to put this method into practice? Do I already have those skills and resources and that information? If not, how can I acquire them?" Based on your evaluation of your ideas, choose the method that seems most realistic and most likely to lead to achievement of your goals; that way, if the first method you choose does not succeed, you can refer back to your list for other methods you can try.)
- *Complex goals and long-term goals should be broken down into smaller, more manageable steps.* For example, if your goal is to open your own business by the end of this year, you probably need to break that goal down into several smaller, more specific goals, such as saving enough money each month in order to have the amount you will need to start the business by the end of the year, purchasing needed equipment finding a location for your business, etc.
- *Think of positive reinforcers (rewards) that you can give to yourself for accomplishing steps toward a goal and for accomplishing the goal itself.* Rewarding yourself for achieving individual steps towards a goal keeps you motivated and working towards that goal. Reinforcers can include such things as a nice dinner out, a break period in which you do something you find relaxing, purchasing a small item you have been wanting, etc. The size of the reinforcer should match, at least approximately, the size of the accomplishment.
- *Write your goals on note cards, along with the steps you will need to take to achieve them.* Next to each step, write down the reinforcer that you will give yourself for accomplishing that step.
- *Keep your note cards in a place where you will see them frequently.* This will help you to stay focused on your goals.
- *Review your goals on a regular basis and monitor your progress toward your goal.* One way of doing this would be to check off steps towards a goal on your note cards as you accomplish those steps. Those checkmarks provide a visual sign of your progress and can help you stay motivated with regard to that goal.
- *If the action plan you have developed is not leading to satisfactory progress, consider ways in which you might change that plan to speed up your progress.* You may need to try an entirely new plan. Your original brainstorming list can come in handy here.
- *Share some or all of your goals with a trusted family member, friend, or therapist, if you feel comfortable doing so.* The person you choose should be willing to support your efforts to achieve your goals and encourage you when you are experiencing difficulties. They may also be able to give you additional suggestions for reaching your goals.
- *Keep these suggestions in mind as you write out action plans for accomplishing each of the goals you have set for yourself.*