

Goal-Setting for the Chronically Ill: *Planning for an Uncertain Future*

Learning how to set attainable goals can give patients
a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

By Trudie Mitschang



JACK CANFIELD, THE popular motivational speaker and co-author of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book series, is frequently quoted on the importance of goal-setting. “Successful people maintain a positive focus in life no matter what is going on around them,” says Canfield. “They stay focused on their past successes rather than their past failures, and on the next action steps they need to take to get them closer to the fulfillment of their goals, rather than all the other distractions that life presents to them.”

Most would agree that Canfield’s observations are sound, but for individuals living with chronic illness, the prospect of goal-setting is a bit more complex. What some might refer to as “life’s distractions” are, for the chronically ill, more like daily roadblocks to accomplishing even basic tasks. Often, the ability to simply make afternoon plans can seem daunting, making long-term goal-setting feel like an impossible task. “Chronic illness presents us with very real limitations,” says mental health expert Sharilyn Johnson, MFT. “It is normal to experience grief regarding the loss of our former life and abilities. Life can improve, but it will require us to focus on the positive aspects of what we can still accomplish. Setting goals is an important part of this process because it gives you hope and purpose.”

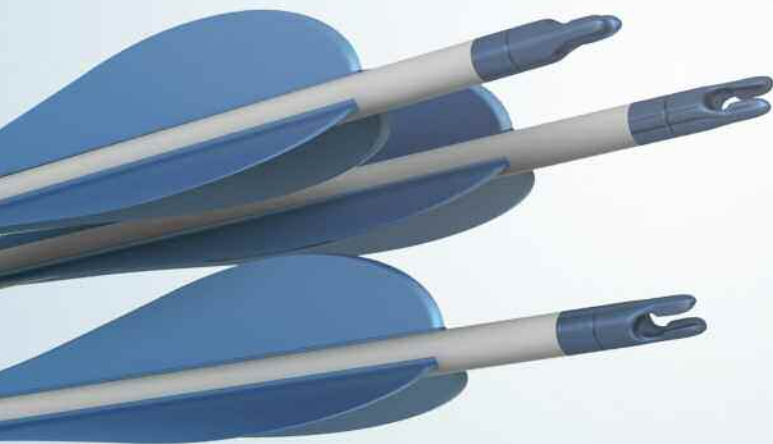
Holistic life coach Julie Holliday agrees, noting that it’s important to set realistic expectations when it comes to identifying goals to avoid setting oneself up for failure: “The purpose of goals is to motivate; don’t allow them to be used as a stick to beat yourself up with. It can be so easy to turn our goals into pressure, which then turns into stress and tension, but stress and tension have nothing to offer our health and happiness!”¹

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The Benefits of Goal-Setting

Living with a chronic illness is unpredictable. Some days, a person will feel well enough to socialize with friends and go to the mall. The next day, that person can’t get out of bed. This kind of uncertainty saps not only physical strength, but also mental focus and the ability to view oneself in a positive light. For patients who flounder when it comes to maintaining motivation for goal-setting, it’s helpful to note that even healthy people struggle with setting and achieving goals. Resistance to change is a common struggle, no matter how motivated one may feel at the outset. Whether the goal is to exercise more, spend less or lose that last 10 pounds, the feelings of accomplishment and self-confidence that occur when a goal is achieved almost universally make the struggle to get there worth the effort. For the chronically ill, setting even a short list of goals with measurable action steps can help reduce feelings of fear and provide a much-needed sense of purpose.

“Pain doesn’t have to take away your ability to pursue meaningful goals. You can take pleasure and pride in working toward small, manageable goals. They matter and they make a difference,” says



Goal Setting in Six Simple Steps

- 1. Write down the goals, and review them often.** The physical act of writing down a goal makes it real and tangible. When writing, intentional language should be used such as inserting the word “will” instead of “would like to” or “might.” For example, if the goal is to begin a walking plan, it should be phrased: “I will take a 15-minute morning walk five days a week starting January 15.” This goal statement has power and helps a person visualize actually following through on the intention.
- 2. Choose one health-related goal.** An individual should consider a goal that would lead to feeling a bit healthier when it is reached. Maybe it’s to research one’s illness to feel more empowered when speaking with a physician. Dietary and lifestyle goals that give improved stamina or help a person sleep better may also be helpful.
- 3. Start slow.** If the goal is to gain strength, one shouldn’t start by joining a gym and trying a 30-minute workout on day one. That will only result in a setback. Instead, a better start might be to try some home exercise videos that focus on easy yoga moves. As goals are reviewed and one gets stronger, stamina and motivation will increase.
- 4. Break goals into manageable segments.** Maybe a person wants to try a new elimination diet to see if that helps relieve symptoms. Rather than eliminating all white flour, sugar, dairy and processed foods, consider cutting out one food group at a time. Or, if the goal is to learn about an illness, take one month to focus on reading a book on the subject and another month to focus on online research.
- 5. Review frequently.** A specific time frame for reviewing goals, either weekly or monthly, should be set, and review periods should be conscientiously observed. During the review period, goals should be looked at and their value reassessed. Was the goal too ambitious? Did the person try doing too much at once? Did an unexpected health setback prevent achieving the goals for that month? The plan should be altered and adjusted as needed.
- 6. Go easy.** No matter how well one lays out goals or commits to achieving them, the fact is a chronic illness does retain a measure of control over what can and cannot be achieved on any given day. As such, a person should rest, regroup and start over as often as needed.

Linda Ruhlman, PhD, psychologist and co-founding director of the Goalistics Chronic Pain Management Program.² “Having and pursuing goals will help you to cope with your pain and reduce feelings of fear and depression.”

The Goalistics program was created by Dr. Ruhlman and Paul Karoly, PhD, to offer affordable, easily accessible computer-based tools to help patients living with chronic pain and depression. The program includes self-assessments, activity trackers, planning tools and rewards to help users develop a structured system for goal-setting and achievement. “Chronic pain can make your goals seem unimportant or unreachable,” says Dr. Ruhlman. “Your pain may interfere with your social goals, career goals or family goals. Personal goals like exercise, hobbies, reading or learning something new make it possible to get back on track.”

Setting S.M.A.R.T. Goals

The S.M.A.R.T. acronym for goal-setting is a popular term that refers to goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely. Consider the phrase: “I hope I can lose 10 pounds by summer.” What transforms that wishful thinking into an actual S.M.A.R.T. goal is putting some parameters around the what, how and when of the proposed plan. “I will lose 10 pounds in the next 90 days by exercising five times a week” changes the hope to a goal. Here is a breakdown of each segment of S.M.A.R.T. goal-setting to help patients get started:

- **Specific:** The goal must be clear and well-defined. Vague or generalized goals are unhelpful because they don’t provide sufficient direction. Clarifying what one wants to achieve and when to

achieve it will make it that much easier to succeed.

- **Measurable:** Include precise amounts, dates and deadlines in goals so success can be measured. If the goal is simply defined as “to reduce expenses,” there is no way of knowing if the goal will be successful. Without a way to measure success, a person will miss out on the celebration that comes with knowing he or she has actually achieved something.

- **Attainable:** Make sure it’s possible to achieve the goals that are set. For instance, if someone is currently inactive and gets winded when walking around the block, participating in a triathlon next year may not be attainable. That said, dream big, but without setting yourself up for failure.

- **Relevant.** Goals should be relevant to core values. By keeping goals aligned with spiritual and personal values, a person will avoid internal conflicts and resistance that can sabotage success later.

- **Timely:** Give goals a deadline. Again, this means that a person knows when he or she can celebrate success. When working on a deadline, a sense of urgency increases and achievement will come that much quicker.

Identifying the motivation for achieving a goal is also a key component to actually achieving it. If the goal is to develop a habit of daily or weekly exercise, the “why” might be to develop enough stamina to play with the kids. Or perhaps a person wants to travel and needs more stamina to do so. For others, the motivation may be to look and feel better and improve self-esteem. The point is, the why for one person may be quite different from the why for someone without a chronic health struggle, but defining the motivation for each of the goals is the first step to gaining the momentum needed to succeed.

Focus on What Can Be Controlled

In the early stages of diagnosis, many patients focus on learning all they can about their disease state, seeking alternative treatment plans and attempting to become healthy again. Unfortunately, just as patients can’t control whether or not they developed a chronic illness, they are also unable to control whether or not they get well. If patients make their goal to cure themselves of their illness, they’re setting a goal that is out of their control to achieve. This can lead to frustration, stress and feelings of discouragement. Instead, they should focus on things they can control. For example, choosing to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables a day is a health-related goal that is realistic and achievable. Likewise, practicing mindful meditation and deep breathing upon waking each day, taking three five-minute stretch breaks throughout the

day and setting aside 20 minutes daily to read a motivational book are positive goals that are completely within patients’ power to accomplish.

Breaking Through Barriers

There are several common barriers that can be overcome during the goal-setting process. While everyone experiences resistance to change, some issues are unique to those with chronic illness:

- **Self-victimization.** When faced with an ongoing health condition, it is easy to feel like a victim of unfair circumstances. The act of setting and achieving even small daily goals can help a person break out of the negative cycle of emotions and begin to accept a new normal. If the illness has made the person feel isolated, for example, a productive goal might be to join an online support group or start a blog to document the journey and connect with others.

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- **Hopelessness.** A chronic health condition is like a roller-coaster ride that never ends. There tend to be dramatic highs and lows, with surprises around each corner. The feeling that “things will never level out” can produce feelings of hopelessness and despair. The good news is, the simple act of writing down goals and planning for a future, while uncertain, can still hold tremendous promise and potential.

- **Underestimating abilities.** When a person has had a life-altering trauma or loss in function, it is going to take some deep reflection and ingenuity to determine how to adapt. But with a strong desire to live a productive, fulfilling life, there can be surprises in store. That person may not be able to perform tasks as efficiently as before, but just might uncover some new skills and talents when pressing forward. ■

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