

Thinking of Making a Healthy Lifestyle Change? Think SMART!



Behavior change can be challenging. Research shows that motivation and intention alone is not enough [i, ii].

There are many strategies that can facilitate behavior change. One strategy is to set goals. Common goals such as eating more fruits and vegetables, exercising, or getting more sleep may be achieved by formulating a structured plan. A plan which includes short, realistic, and actionable goals can lead to a larger long-term goal.

Research shows that certain goals are associated with positive emotions, thoughts, and overall mental health [ii]. A goal to eat nuts and fruits as a snack may be more achievable than a goal to stop eating cookies as a snack. Focus on *adding rather than subtracting* a behavior can be helpful. In time, the added behavior may become the new habit.

Knowledge and/or skills to facilitate change are also important to achieve a goal. A plan to incorporate muscle tone exercise into the work day, for example, requires familiarity with a specific set of exercises (see the Body Breaks Beyond video series on the NCC Wellness Committee website if this is a goal). Choose exercises that are doable. This will help increase self-esteem and self-efficacy - perceptions that will help continue to motivate change.

SMART goals is an acronym for goals or objectives that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound. Originally created to help corporate management to achieve goals and objectives, SMART goals show promising results in making health behavior changes [iii, iv].

First define the goal. Consider why it is important, when it will be done and how it will be done. To achieve the long-term goal of eating healthier foods to boost immunity, consider starting with a shorter goal such as adding one serving of a vegetable or fruit at lunch.

A well-defined goal using SMART objectives could look like this: I will eat at least one serving (a fist size) of an affordable vegetable or fruit at lunch 5 days a week for the next month. The goal is:

Specific: uses actionable words to define what the goal is.

Measurable: uses numbers or quantities to measure or compare progress.

Achievable: is feasible or easy to put into action.

Realistic: considers obstacles such as resources, costs, timing.

Time-bound: sets a specific time frame to complete the goal.

Tips to achieve a goal:

- It helps to be accountable and to have the support of someone else (friend, family) to make a behavior change [iv].
- Identify obstacles along the way. Consider ways to overcome them.
- Reflect and evaluate your progress. Modify steps such as frequency or length of time, if necessary.
- Provide a reward unrelated to the goal and that serves your physical and mental health.
- Mentally rehearse your goal when needed. Seeing it may help achieve it!

- i. Contento, Isobel R. *Nutrition Education: Linking Research, Theory, and Practices*. 3rd ed., Jones & Bartlett, 2016.
- ii. Bailey RR. Goal Setting and Action Planning for Health Behavior Change. *Am J Lifestyle Med*. 2017;13(6):615-618. Published 2017 Sep 13. doi:10.1177/1559827617729634
- iii. Cook HE, Garris LA, Steber CJ, Gulum AH. Impact of SMART Goals on Diabetes Management in a Pharmacist – Led Telehealth Clinic. *J Phar Pract*. OnlineFirst September 2, 2022. doi:10.1177/08971900221125021
- iv. White ND, Bautista V, Lenz T, Cosimano A. Using the SMART-EST Goals in Lifestyle Medicine Prescription. *Am J Lifestyle Med*. 2020;14(3):271-273. Published 2020 Feb 17. doi:10.1177/1559827620905775