

LESSON ONE

A REALISTIC APPROACH TO GOAL SETTING

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Summary



REALISTIC GOALS BENEFIT BOTH THE COACH AND THE CLIENT, as they ensure that the client's energy and effort are appropriately placed and the instruction and coaching from the coach are effectively tailored to the individual needs of the client.

Realistic goals are easier to achieve because they provide a level of detail and relevance to the client that connects the goals to what the client values in life. Goals can be focused on past, present, or future accomplishments exclusively, or on some combination of the three.

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Jonathan Ross' "800 pounds of parents" directly inspired his prolific fitness career. He lost his father to obesity at over 400 pounds, then helped his mother lose 170 pounds. This ability to bring fitness to those who need it the most has made Ross a two-time Personal Trainer of the Year Award Winner (ACE and IDEA), fitness expert for Discovery Fit and Health, and a fitness industry thought leader. An ACE Certified Personal Trainer and a prolific author and speaker, Ross shares compelling fitness information through live appearances, his book, *Abs Revealed*, and numerous articles and blogs.

Coaches who ask the right questions will gain a detailed understanding of the motivations of the client that is indispensable when developing recommendations for lifestyle change. Well-chosen questions provide the coach with absolute clarity on client goals and on the obstacles to achieving those goals—a terrific aid to adherence.

SMART GOALS

Clients often express fairly general training goals, such as wanting to “tone muscles” or “lose some weight.” The coach should help clients define goals in more specific and measurable terms so that progress can be evaluated. Effective goals are commonly said to be SMART goals, which means they are:

- **Specific:** Goals must be clear and unambiguous, stating specifically what should be accomplished.
- **Measurable:** Goals must be measurable so that clients can see whether they are making progress. Examples of measurable goals include performing a given workout two times a week or losing 5 pounds (2.3 kg).
- **Attainable:** Goals should be realistically attainable by the individual client. The achievement of attaining a goal reinforces commitment to the program and encourages the client to continue exercising.
- **Relevant:** Goals must be relevant to the particular interest, needs, and abilities of the individual client.
- **Time-bound:** Goals must contain estimated timelines for completion. Clients should be evaluated regularly to monitor progress toward goals.

The SMART goal concept is ubiquitous in coaching manuals and articles on goal-setting. While this should form the foundation for the coach’s goal-setting process with clients, the coach does not need to consciously “tick off the boxes” when helping clients establish their program goals. In other words, the coach does not need to ask if each goal is “SMART.” Instead, the client and coach should work together to develop long- and short-term objectives that work within this framework as a natural part of the process. Eventually, a coach will be able to easily recognize a well-constructed goal when he or she hears one. This lesson employs real-world, practical applications and implications of using the SMART goal-setting approach with clients.

WHY GOALS ARE ESSENTIAL

How does a goal turn into real and lasting change in someone’s life? More importantly, how can coaches properly and effectively facilitate the process of goal setting at the beginning of the professional relationship with a new client?

Goals benefit both the client and the coach, as they have the power to motivate clients during the entire process of change. They provide clarity that aids the client in directing action on a daily basis to make steady progress toward goals. Perhaps most importantly, goals may help reduce relapse and enhance program adherence, especially in adults and adolescents who engage in dietary and physical-activity behavioral change practices (Shilts, Horowitz, & Townsend, 2009; Shilts, Horowitz, & Townsend, 2004). Being mindful of goals can help clients overcome the obstacles that will inevitably arise during any process of lifestyle change.

For the coach, personal client goals provide insights that are useful in developing specific recommendations on lifestyle modification, designing exercise programs, and providing nutritional education, and then developing coaching strategies to successfully deliver this information to the client. Figure 1-1 presents a list of questions that can be used either in written form or asked in

person during the initial stages of the client–coach relationship to provide realistic goal-setting opportunities. This gives the coach an opportunity to identify areas for follow-up questioning that require a higher level of detail than the client provided initially. This serves two important purposes: (1) it demonstrates to the client that the coach will be circumspect in examining all potential opportunities for success and obstacles to that success, and (2) it reminds the client that he or she will need to go beyond the customary simple answers to goal-setting and provide thoughtful responses to the questions to help the coach provide relevant guidance.

Figure 1-1

CLIENT GOAL QUESTIONNAIRE

- What are your short-term goals (three to six months) and long-term goals (beyond six months)?
- What could hinder your fitness program (e.g., work schedules, commute times, and child care/activities)?
- What motivates you?
- What things are most important to you? How will a healthy lifestyle complement or support this?
- What kinds of exercise programs have you tried in the past?
- What did you like most and least about your previous exercise programs?
- What types of exercise or activities do you currently enjoy?
- What is your favorite exercise or activity?
- How will you integrate exercise into your life?
- How much time do you have to commit to exercise?
- What kind of support (e.g., family and friends) do you have to help you change your lifestyle?
- What is something you are good at now? Did you know you were good at it before you did it or the first time you did it?
- When was the last time you exercised regularly (at least three times per week) and how long did it last? Why did you stop?

Asking the right questions has the power to bring clients back to a more thoughtful approach to lifestyle change, as opposed to a more reactive approach. This helps clients proceed at their own pace with help from the coach to organize the steps into an action plan.



THINK IT THROUGH

Practice using the questionnaire presented in Figure 1-1 with a friend or family member. Were you able to draw out any unexpected details from him or her? How would this discussion help you develop a comprehensive weight-management plan?

Developing Meaningful Goals

Imagine someone planning a vacation. If he or she says, “I want to go on vacation,” and never provides any additional details, it is very unlikely that he or she will ever get anywhere. Without sufficient details of where to go, how long to stay, and how to travel, the vacation will not happen.

Yet this is the exactly the same approach that many clients take when stating goals to a coach. Clients will often state goals such as “be healthier,” “feel better,” “have more energy,” “lose weight,” or “get in shape.” Failing to ask for additional details at this critical stage can greatly diminish the chances of success with the program.

There is a difference between knowing *how* to act, and being *motivated* to act. However, when leading a client to behavioral change, the first instinct is often to teach and advise. It is the

motivational aspect of change that is most important, as it has the power to enhance a client's desire to adopt healthy behaviors, and perhaps more importantly, provide the confidence and will to overcome obstacles and setbacks when they arise.

When the coach discovers the specific, highly personal goals of a client, they reflect a level of detail that provides an obvious connection to what the client values in life and cares about most. Knowing why the goal matters to a client is essential information for the coach, as this information is not only useful at the beginning when developing a plan, but also during the course of the client-coach relationship when challenges arise. If the coach can successfully and continuously remind the client of the connection between specific day-to-day behaviors and the larger goal by linking the behaviors to the goal through what the client values, the client will more effectively overcome obstacles.

When a client and coach collaborate to develop realistic goals, an essential component of this process is to identify common obstacles for the client. These can be either external factors, such as pressure at work, at home, or from a family member, or internal factors, such as a client's previous failed attempts at health improvement and a resulting lack of confidence or negative mindset. Once common obstacles are identified, the client and coach can work to develop solutions before those challenges arise. The stress of facing a challenge often leads clients away from healthy behaviors and impairs their decision-making ability. As a result, it is essential to plan a strategy for how to react to common obstacles and challenges before a client is actually faced with them by always linking specific behaviors to the goals. This teaches a client to focus on his or her goals rather than on the obstacle itself. The result is that the client can direct his or her energy to finding a way around the obstacle rather than on the frustration or stress of the obstacle itself.



APPLY WHAT YOU KNOW

PREPARING FOR OBSTACLES

A client that came to you initially with a goal of weight loss is three weeks into her program. The client is now dealing with major pressures at work and at home and, as a result, is beginning to have trouble following the exercise and healthy eating plan the two of you created together. She arrives for a session 10 minutes late and says to you, "I'm so sorry. I'm just overwhelmed at work and at home and haven't worked out the past few days and I'm upset because I haven't lost much weight yet." Your response in this situation will often determine whether the client overcomes the obstacles and continues progressing or continues to struggle.

From your early sessions with this client, you know that she is motivated by a desire to be fit enough to play with her kids and enjoy recreational activities with the family, even though the initial goals were simply stated as "weight loss." You also discovered that the client has a history of stopping and starting exercise programs because, invariably, situations just like the current one arise and the circumstances force her to miss a few workouts. She gets very upset and discouraged with herself, which only adds to the stress of dealing with the work and home pressures. When the additional disappointment of not seeing much progress with her weight-loss efforts is added to the mix, it all feels like too much. This client is on the brink of losing her commitment, so your response is critical. In this situation, by knowing the history of this tendency in the client and her usual all-or-nothing response, you can work with the client to develop a different strategy.

Coach: "It sounds like you have a lot going on and I can see how it's tough for you to get your workouts in. Would you like it if we came up with a shorter workout you could do on the days that get out of control and don't leave you with enough time to perform your full workout?"

It is very likely that the client will appreciate this approach, since it gives her an opportunity to feel successful in the face of challenges. As for the disappointment expressed regarding the client's goals, it is important to relay to her that her feelings are valid.

Coach: "I understand that you're frustrated right now with the lack of progress. Have you had a chance to do something active with your kids recently?"

Client: "It's funny you should ask. Last weekend, we had a family gathering and my son wanted me to play tag with him and the other kids. I did so for several minutes and had a great time. It was only after I stopped that I realized that I wasn't nearly as tired as I normally would be after doing that."

Coach: “That’s terrific. You had mentioned that along with weight loss, one of your goals was to have more energy to play with your kids, and that is already happening. That is a clear sign that your body is changing and getting fitter. If you can find a way to keep this good momentum going, you’ll notice that additional results will soon follow.”

Client: “You know, I guess I’ve gotten so used to looking at the scale as a way to measure progress that I’d forgotten about the other significant and meaningful goals I had mentioned.”

Coach: “I’d imagine that it’s quite a great feeling to be able to play with your kids.”

Client: “Yes, and I know I have a lot going on right now, but I can find a way to still get my workouts in.”

Coach: “The exercise will actually help you deal with the stress you’re experiencing and keep you on track for reaching your goals.”

This exchange is impossible unless the coach takes the time to ask the right questions, and most importantly, helps the client arrive at her own solutions by validating the feelings of frustration, disappointment, and stress, while at the same time guiding the client to tap into positive emotions that can be drawn on for strength to overcome the current obstacle.

REALISTIC GOALS BEGIN WITH A PAST, PRESENT, OR FUTURE EMPHASIS

Helping a client achieve health goals ultimately involves creating a better version of who the client already is. As such, the goals should have an emphasis on the past, present, or future—or some combination of all three. A simple way to remember these categories is to realize that most goals can be categorized by a desire to:

- Be all you used to be (past)
- Be better now (present)
- Be all you can be (future)

Past Goals

A client who focuses on past goals typically wants to resume participation in a cherished sport or recreational activity, or perhaps lose weight to return to a period of life when he or she felt better and more energetic. Often, when stating a weight-loss goal of a specific number of pounds, a client may say something like, “When I weighed ‘x’ number of pounds, I felt better, enjoyed being active, and liked how my clothes fit.” It is important when encountering this type of goal to note the significance the client places on getting back to a feeling. In this example, there is nothing transformative about the client achieving the target weight. It is the behaviors that might lead to weight loss that will create the feeling the client is seeking. In most cases, if a client is feeling the way he or she wants to feel, the weight will matter less. Thus, it is essential to simply state the importance of the positive feelings associated with behavioral change and perhaps introduce the idea of a lowered emphasis on weight without making too much of an issue about it. In this case, it is better to ask for additional details and information about how he or she felt “back then.” The more detail the coach can get from the client about the positive feelings associated with behavioral change for weight loss, the more the coach can connect those feelings with current behaviors.

Other clients may desire to participate in a sport they used to play. This typically means they are trying to recapture a feeling of competition or camaraderie. Some important considerations here are the practicality of returning to the sport and any necessary modifications to the intensity of the sport given the client’s current conditioning levels. For example, a client who used to play rugby or American football may find it impractical to do so as an adult. In this case, it may be best to discuss other opportunities for expressing this goal that might be more appropriate, as the level of organization and equipment needs may prohibit pursuit of the original sport. In another case, the coach may have a client who was previously a competitive singles tennis player and, given the need to respect current conditioning levels, it may be prudent to recommend resuming tennis through doubles play while following an exercise program geared toward preparing the client for a possible return to singles tennis.

For those who have never played sports (and have no desire to do so), there may be a desire to

return to a cherished recreational activity such as hiking, skiing, gardening, or any number of other possibilities. The same considerations would apply in terms of practicality for the return to the activity in the event it requires a period for the body to readjust to the stresses placed on it.

In all of the above scenarios, setting appropriate goals is achieved by the coach questioning or probing to find out details about why the client is looking back to capture a feeling or experience from his or her past.

There is one major caveat with recurring goals that were first created in the past: The coach should be vigilant for old goals that are no longer appropriate, relevant, or motivating, yet are still expressed by the client. For example, a woman in her fifties may state a target weight that she maintained in her thirties. She may have been stating the goal for so long that it has become automatic to do so without examining the current strength of the desire for this goal. Often, fitness goals will naturally evolve or shift steadily and in subtle ways over the years. Sometimes the shift can happen so gradually that clients do not realize that their goals have changed. When working with this type of individual, there may be a high risk of frustration for the coach, as recommended actions and behaviors are not adopted, results are less than expected for the client, and compliance becomes a continual struggle. It is best to avoid this situation when possible by learning as much as possible about the client's motivations for achieving a goal. The danger is that sometimes these goals appear very reasonable and realistic, but just not for the client at this time in his or her life.

As a result, it may not be immediately apparent to the coach that seemingly reasonable goals are not realistic for a particular individual. This is another reason why it is advisable to gather as much additional information as possible about a client's goals before recommending a course of action.

Present Goals

Many clients will obtain the services of a coach for help with something that has motivated them to take action now. It may be medical or experiential in nature. A client may want to improve health and fitness measures now (e.g., lower blood pressure, lower body fat, increase muscle mass, or increase bone density), or may have a desire for a greater ability to physically perform in an area that is more immediate (e.g., playing with grandchildren, getting in shape for a short-term upcoming event such as a vacation or wedding, or perhaps being a short-term caregiver for an aging parent.)

A client may have had a recent doctor's appointment and received news of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, low bone density, high triglycerides, or some other indicator of less-than-optimal health. If this is the main motivation for someone, it will likely not be enough on its own to provide the drive for long-term success. The coach must find out what elements of the client's life will be made better by improvement in these measures, as these health measures are typically rather abstract in nature, in that most people feel no symptomatic effects of the imbalance. In this case, it may shift the goal to more of a future perspective. For example, upon further investigation, a parent struggling with obesity, with test results showing elevated blood pressure and high blood sugar, may be motivated by a desire to live long enough to see his or her child get married or graduate college. As a result, the coach can frame the present goal in terms of enjoyment of future experiences.

Other clients have a looming event such as a class reunion, wedding, vacation, or "active vacation" where they may be attempting a long and challenging hike, for example, which directs all effort and action in the short-term toward achieving the goal. In this case, setting realistic goals is often fairly straightforward, as the timeline and nature of the event dictate most of the program variables.

Better health often expands the physical sense of self. In other words, through the process of achieving one goal, new abilities and a sense of physical competency may give birth to new goals that neither the client nor the coach could have envisioned at the outset. It is wise for the coach



to look for opportunities during the process of achieving the current goal to actively encourage the client to consider any new goals that might develop. This provides the coach with a natural and seamless way to promote the adoption of healthy behaviors beyond the current goals.

For example, a coach may have a client who is preparing for a vacation and simply wants to feel good about how she looks in a bathing suit. This concern may occupy her focus at the outset. However, as she is progressing, a focus on psychological and physical function may emerge as she experiences better reactions to stressful situations and more stamina during recreational activity. The coach will want to connect these improvements with the healthy behaviors the client has adopted, as many clients will often be unaware of the cause-and-effect nature of global improvements to many areas of life when better health is attained. Identifying these unintended consequences of better health is essential for converting someone who has a singular, immediate goal into someone who finds ongoing reasons to pursue a healthy lifestyle that makes everyday living better.

Future Goals

A client may want to prepare for a long-term upcoming event (e.g., extended travel with a lot of walking) or may have a fitness goal such as participating in a charity event or other endurance race after a long layoff from exercise. The main differences between a “present” goal and a “future” goal are the timeline and focus. A present goal has a relatively short timeline and the goal itself captures the client’s imagination and energy. With a future goal, the timeline is generally longer and,



while the client is of course focused on the goal, he or she typically is aware of, and often directly seeking, many of the secondary benefits associated with the goal.

For example, a client may say, “I’d like to do a triathlon, as a few of my friends have started doing them and it will give me something to shoot for. But right now I just want to exercise consistently and feel better on a day-to-day basis.” In this case, many of the same healthy behaviors that will move the client toward the future goal of completing a triathlon will also address the more immediate goal of having more energy now.

Future goals can be inspirational in terms of the client seeking to achieve something new and challenging that will require a lifestyle effort in a number of areas. Future

goals can also be related to the pursuit of a new experience. This new experience might allow the client to have a great experience with a loved one, reclaim a sense of physical mastery, or travel to a destination best experienced and enjoyed through better fitness. Future goals are often broader in scope, which can be an aid to the coach in that the client will already realize that there will be physical, mental, and lifestyle aspects of achieving the goal.

With these goals, it is helpful for the coach to prioritize the smaller goals and behaviors that are necessary to achieve the larger ones, as it is often difficult for clients to easily organize a future goal into smaller actions.

For example, a coach may have a client who has been sedentary for years and has decided he wants to complete a marathon. To achieve this goal, the coach will want to collaborate with the client to lay out a schedule of actions. This might start with setting a more short-term, realistic goal of the client completing a 5K or “fun run” and beginning the exercise programming, nutrition education, and recovery strategies with that smaller goal in mind.

Another good example includes a coach who has a client who is the less-fit half of a couple that is planning a backpacking trip. In this case, the client may have a number of goals, all relating to the main goal of being able to physically perform in a way that allows him or her to enjoy the trip. The client may want to be able to keep up with his or her partner and avoid the embarrassment of having to stop often, to be comfortable enough to actually enjoy the surroundings without exhaustion

dampening the experience, and may have some joint concerns that reflect a need to develop the ability to handle the repetitive nature of the activity.

An important realization for the coach in situations like this is that the goals themselves are actually secondary to the *feelings* associated with the goal. It is unlikely in this scenario that the exercise program itself and the feeling of greater hiking ability will be adequate to sustain motivation. To some extent, the goals are motivated by the emotions of the client surrounding the upcoming experience rather than the physical performance he or she can expect. Therefore, it is imperative for the coach to appropriately frame the goals and program. For example, it may be wise to schedule an occasional outdoor workout session during which the coach asks the client to notice or identify various things about the surroundings. Similarly, the coach should gather information on the current conditioning level of the client's partner, so standards of physical performance can be used that will be most meaningful for the client.

WHY DO CLIENTS' GOALS MATTER?

Coaches often have expertise in the “how” of lifestyle change. That is, programming exercise and providing healthy eating education are common actions taken by competent coaches to help their clients effectively lead healthier lives. However, the “why” behind the client's desire to change is often the hardest information to come by, but is essential when making lifestyle changes, as it provides ample motivation for a client to successfully navigate the ups and downs of the process of change.

Connecting Goals With Values

It is imperative for the coach to discover why the client's goals matter and how the client's health efforts will connect to what the client values in life. This information will help the coach provide guidance for the client to overcome obstacles and challenges. By knowing what the client values in life, the coach can help ensure that goals are real and relevant for the client by framing the lifestyle behaviors in terms of those values.

As discussed previously, many clients will initially provide generic, vague, and ambiguous goals. By putting the goals in context of what the client values, the coach can facilitate the process of transforming the goals from abstract ideas into a specific and realistic plan of action that the client is motivated to begin. This is done by continuously and repeatedly asking “why?” with open-ended questions until the reasons for why the goal matters to the client are uncovered.



APPLY WHAT YOU KNOW

CLIENT–COACH ROLE PLAY

Coach: “Please tell me your health and fitness goals.”

Client: “I'd like to lose weight—about 50 pounds.”

coach: “What will be different in your life if you achieve that goal?”

Client: “I want my clothes to fit better and feel like I have more energy.”

Coach: “And why is this important to you?”

Client: “I just want to feel better. I sometimes get so tired that I have little energy left and snap at my kids and husband at the end of a long day.”

Coach: “How do you see your weight-loss goal having a connection to this?”

Client: “I don't know.”

Coach: “Do your responsibilities at home and work leave you feeling like you have no time for yourself and that you are doing for others all day?”

Client (begins to get emotional): “Now that you mention it, I often think to myself that I just would like some ‘me’ time. And I get down on myself, as I want to set a good example for healthy living to my kids, but I just feel like I can't get started when I have to keep handling everything that comes my way each day.”

Coach: “Could it be that you've never really progressed in your weight-loss goal because weight loss, in and of itself, isn't really your most important goal? It seems to me that having some time for yourself so you can give to

others without losing yourself and setting a good example for your kids so they grow up with healthy behaviors is very important to you. Does that sound accurate?”

Client: “You know, I’ve never really thought of it that way, but you’re right. I’ve always put my own goals on hold when life gets busy and I just feel so drained inside because I can’t escape the things I do for others.”

Coach: “Have you considered that by carving out some time for exercise, getting proper rest, and having better nutrition, you might be more efficient and effective in your other roles, while also setting a good example for your kids on how to manage their lives when they become adults? If they see you reacting to the stresses of the day and ignoring your own needs, they might wind up following the same pattern when they are older.”

Client: “Wow. That sure gives me a lot to think about. Fitness has always been something I’ve felt like I was supposed to do, but also felt guilty about taking the time to pursue.”

In this example, the same behaviors that might achieve weight loss are put in the context of the client having some time for herself, becoming more efficient, and setting a good example for her kids. By attaching the goals to the client’s values, they take on new relevance.

Lasting Motivation Comes From Within

A crucial aspect in connecting goals to what a client values involves determining if his or her health goals are originating from a desire for personal fulfillment (intrinsic motivation), from direct environmental input such as the praise and support from family members or a physician (extrinsic motivation), or some combination of the two (a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation).

Intrinsically motivated behaviors are engaged in for their own sake and for the pleasure and satisfaction derived from the process of engaging in the activity. Intrinsically motivated behaviors are associated with psychological well-being, interest, enjoyment, fun, and persistence (Ryan &

Deci, 2000). Ultimately, the objective is to develop some amount of intrinsic motivation in all clients, as the pursuit of health goals for primarily extrinsically motivated factors is rarely adequate to sustain motivation to progress, especially in the case of adherence to physical activity or exercise (Buckworth et al., 2007).

A common statement among many people struggling to achieve health goals is that they are “always doing for others,” so it may appear that extrinsic motivation is a significant source of motivation. However, even those who do a lot for others do so because it provides them with a pleasant emotional response. Further, the immediate satisfaction of doing for others can allow someone to put off the harder job of focusing on self-improvement. Ultimately, everyone is, to a significant degree, self-motivated, which is perfectly normal, though many people are taught to eschew self-motivation for self-sacrifice. The coach’s ability to facilitate a client’s reframing of extrinsic motivations as internal ones will enhance the likelihood of success.

Intrinsic Motivation

Some clients will naturally begin with health goals for their own personal achievement and thus are intrinsically motivated at the outset. A client may want to get back in shape after childbirth, reverse poor posture from a sedentary lifestyle, feel more confident about his or her body, enjoy more effortless movement during an activity, or increase performance in some physical pursuit. The main role of the coach with these types of goals is to ensure that the goals are realistic given the client’s current physical abilities and ability to commit to the changes necessary given time demands.

One area to investigate with any client—but especially so with clients with primarily self-interested goals—is the level of support the client has at home, and perhaps at work. Often, if someone is



pursuing a change for his or her own benefit and the change is significant enough to affect food choices and leisure-time choices, there can be passive resistance from the client's family and/or coworkers. If a client is seeking significant health improvement, he or she may no longer be curling up on the sofa to watch television in the evening and may begin to skip going out to lunch with coworkers. This can result in subtle resistance from any individual whose preferences are challenged and negatively impacted by the behaviors of the client.

For example, a new client who has signed up for a 5K run and begun resistance training and improving nutrition habits in an effort to reduce body fat might get complaints about the different foods and meals at home and the time spent performing evening workouts that used to be spent watching favorite television shows. At work, the client may have coworkers who dislike the fact that the client no longer joins them to eat out at restaurants with poor quality food, or a client may work in an office that insists on having pastries available every morning or having a cake for everyone's birthday in the office. In isolation, any one of these challenges to a client's resolve in making a change could potentially be handled well. But the cumulative effect of "getting it from all sides" (i.e., overload of environmental stimuli) can leave the client exhausted mentally and prone to slipping back into familiar behavioral patterns from the subtle pull of the people in his or her life. In this case, it is essential for the coach to be the client's partner in identifying these potential interpersonal challenges and discussing strategies for working around them to equip the client to successfully navigate future obstacles.



APPLY WHAT YOU KNOW

OVERCOMING ENVIRONMENTAL STIMULI OBSTACLES

A new client works in an office where someone always brings in doughnuts to the weekly staff meeting. In addition, there are a large number of people on staff and the office manager insists on having a cake or cupcakes for everyone's birthday. The client finds it hard to resist these constant temptations. It is absolutely essential at this time to avoid reminding the client of the physical impact of consuming such foods. Instead, the coach can help the client find a way around this common obstacle.

Client: "I can usually resist the sweets once or twice, but I have a sweet tooth, so when my coworkers start hassling me to just relax and tell me that one cupcake won't kill me, I eventually cave."

Coach: "If I was your client and you were the coach, how would you tell me to solve this problem?"

Client: "I don't know... maybe make sure you're really full from a healthy lunch before the birthday party or something like that."

Coach: "That's a great idea! If you know in advance of when this occurs, you can plan accordingly by making sure you've eaten just before. Can I try to expand this concept for you?"

Client: "Please do. I feel like I need help with this."

Coach: "Sometimes you might not be full enough after eating or you might not know exactly when the sweets will be served. Can you keep a toothbrush and toothpaste in your desk? Right before an office gathering where sweets are going to be served, go brush your teeth in the washroom. This might make it easier to say no, since it will affect the taste. What do you think of that idea? Does it sound like a good solution to you?"

Client: "That's great! I'll either make sure I eat a proper meal or brush my teeth right before the office party."

Coach: "And once you've done this enough times that you've broken the behavioral pattern, you will likely be able to decline the sweets even when you aren't full or haven't just brushed your teeth. We're just using those methods to disrupt the automatic reaction you have to the sweets right now to give you a chance to build your confidence and the ability to make better choices."

In this scenario, the client and coach strategize short-term solutions to give the client a feeling of success and a break from the stress of having to exhaust willpower fighting to decline sweets. The client either chooses the behavior herself or agrees to suggestions (not directives) from the coach. This gives the client a chance to experience some "wins," which builds confidence and reinforces the ability to make the desired choice when necessary.

Extrinsic Motivation

Some clients will begin with health goals established mostly as a result of direct input from social contacts or other environmental stimuli, and are therefore primarily extrinsically motivated at the outset. This may derive from the need to be a caregiver for an aging parent, the need to physically keep up with grandchildren as a part-time babysitter, the result of a stern warning from the doctor after some test results, or a spouse or partner who is pressuring the client to get back in shape to maintain physical attraction.

It is essential to realize that while the health goals may have an external origin, the client is ultimately seeking the internal satisfaction of pleasing the other party, so the motivations are simply not yet connected to the behaviors and actions necessary to get results. The external factors are less likely to provide long-term motivation, so the coach should look for opportunities to reframe the goals in terms of the internal satisfaction that the client receives.

For example, a coach may have a client whose children have gone off to college, and the client's spouse wants to take the opportunity to travel and explore places best seen on foot with a lot of walking. If the client is not as interested in this goal, but is pursuing better fitness to participate with his or her spouse, it is likely that the client will have adherence problems should any challenges arise in pursuit of the goal. The coach can make the goal more meaningful by finding out what the client is interested in and seek ways to make the goal more relevant to those deeper, more personal desires while still steering the eventual programming in the direction of the initially stated goal. This uncovers both the internal and external motivators and provides the coach the opportunity to instill the notion in the client that it is acceptable to focus on one's own goals.

The coach will find it helpful to use some of the questions identified in Figure 1-1, such as "What things are most important to you? How will a healthy lifestyle complement or support this?" The coach could also ask, "What do you hope to get out of this experience of getting fit enough to travel and being able to walk comfortably for longer distances?" This helps the coach dig a little deeper to reveal the intrinsic motivators for this client, even though the main reasons for getting started are extrinsic. Most clients will have a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic goals at the outset.

Combined Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

It is common for clients to present with goals that are initially a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, as both motivations exist within individuals to different degrees (Vallerand, 1997). In many ways, this can be helpful, since the goals will originate from many aspects of the client's life, so there are more opportunities to reinforce the goals. However, the majority of a client's motivation should become intrinsic for long-term success to become more likely. This ensures that there is enough internal drive to overcome obstacles and enjoy successes while staying focused on the daily tasks required for health-behavior change. For example, a client may present with a directive from his or her doctor to exercise because of some health concerns such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or anxiety from stress. This directive may have triggered the client to recall that he or she used to enjoy a variety of activities before the career and raising a family took over. He or she may have been into hiking and played tennis once a week. The "need" to get back in shape coming from the doctor (extrinsic motivator) has stimulated the desire to return to these two cherished activities (intrinsic motivators). When putting together the recommendations for this client, the coach will be able to achieve both goals by focusing efforts primarily on the intrinsic motivators, as those will be more relevant for the client and most likely generate better program adherence.



If a coach can uncover the "why" of a client's motivation toward a goal, the client and coach can use this information to support his or her intentions to stick with the program to reach the goal. What techniques would you use to help clients discover why they have decided to pursue a particular goal?

BIG CHANGES COME FROM SMALL GOALS

When the goal is better health and fitness, it is often a “big” goal for the client and, as great as it would feel to achieve the goal, it can paradoxically be discouraging and make consistent progress harder if the goal is not shaped and made smaller and more realistic.

There are three key reasons to transform large goals into smaller, more realistic goals:

- Overly general or unrealistic goals demotivate and overwhelm people.
- Small goals direct energy to manageable actions and tasks.
- Transforming larger aspirations into a series of smaller goals provides a clearer picture, or roadmap, for success.

General or Unrealistic Goals Demotivate and Overwhelm

If a client is seeking a return to health and fitness after many years of ignoring it and has “let him- or herself go,” there may be a large difference between his or her ultimate vision of fitness compared with the current situation. This discrepancy can easily discourage a client the moment a challenge or obstacle appears. The coach can help make the goals more realistic by having the client clearly define them. This involves having the client imagine what life would be like if the goal was reached, and imagine, in very small and simple ways, what life would be like if the client were living in a more fit and capable body. A coach can ask the following questions to help facilitate discovering the specific vision that a client has for his or her health goals:

- What would be the first thing you would do in the morning if you were more fit?
- What activities would you engage in?
- With whom would you engage in these activities?
- How would you spend your free time?



Smaller Goals Direct Energy to Actions and Tasks

Vague intentions to increase fitness are not as useful as clearly defined goals. Even if action is taken, if the goal is unclear, the slightest obstacle or challenge can lead the client to abandon the goal for more immediate concerns. The coach can help clients discover what fitness means to them by getting clients to provide their own definitions in clear, specific terms relating to the *experience* of living in a healthy body. This helps make fitness more personal and meaningful. If a client develops a series of smaller goals that are within immediate reach, it is easy to generate a feeling of real possibility and hope about achieving goals in general. This positive emotional response is essential, as it has the power to broaden the client’s sense of his or her ability to achieve goals. Small goals must have two main characteristics: (1) They must be meaningful to the client and (2) be within immediate reach (i.e., they should have a relatively short timeline, such as a daily or weekly task).

For example, if a client has a goal to “eat healthier,” it is very unlikely that this will translate into specific behaviors. What does “eat healthier” mean when the client arrives home after sitting in traffic, is already hungry, and has nothing planned for dinner? The client’s immediate needs will outweigh any general sense of eating healthier. When challenged or under pressure, the most familiar path is always the first option. If that means ordering a pizza, this behavior is exactly what will continue to happen. The goal to eat healthier needs to be made clearer by defining specific actions for the client. For example, the client might agree to schedule a time on the weekends to write out a plan for dinners for every weeknight, go shopping to buy the necessary foods for those meals, and always carry a bottle of water to sip on throughout the day. These actions should be chosen by the client, with the coach making recommendations about which behaviors may need to change and the client making the choices from a list of actions related to how to make the change.

Persevere With Small Goals

Successful behavioral change is almost always the result of small achievements accumulated over time. It is worth pointing out to clients that the opposite is also true—the cumulative effect of repeatedly engaging in a series of small behaviors (e.g., getting a little less physical activity, eating a few “treats” every day, or skipping a meal or two every few days) can have a big impact over time. These are the ways people make physical changes—for better or for worse. A decade of small, poor choices and unhealthy behaviors may lead someone to a decision to get back in shape and hire a coach for guidance. Often, once the decision is made to get in shape, a client will expect to see results very rapidly. The client may even say something like, “I need to make big changes.” In reality, the client needs to make a series of small behavioral changes in a number of areas that will create the big change. The typical client’s focus on big changes means he or she will often be very intense at the outset and think that the necessary changes will take a big effort and vast willpower. Clients may even appear very committed when sitting in front of the coach discussing the goals. However, when daily life takes over and they are behind on errands, work projects, and home or family demands, the continued effort to change will seem like too much and will be pushed aside for more immediate concerns.



EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

WILLPOWER

Willpower is the ability to ignore temporary pleasure or discomfort to pursue a longer-term goal, and it is a biological function. It is a

mind-body response, not a virtue. Anyone using willpower for long periods or for multiple tasks will have less resolve to make better choices. A review of the literature on self-control and decision-making abilities has shown that willpower is inherently limited (Baumeister, 2003). That is, self-control depletes willpower in much the same way that exercise temporarily depletes physical power. Researchers have found that in experiments where people exert their willpower on one occasion, they have difficulty doing so a second time (Baumeister, 2003). This effect was discovered with all sorts of self-control tasks, such as avoiding tempting foods, suppressing emotions, and sticking with challenging problems.

Using willpower is, in essence, using one’s rational side to control or dictate what the emotional side wants—and it is not really a fair fight, as emotions are a more powerful driver of decisions than reason. If clients set too many goals or have goals that are too large and imposing, they can, by force of will, maintain things for a short period. At the first sign of trouble, however—when they get stuck in traffic on the way home from work or have extra responsibilities in dealing with family matters—their resolve crumbles, and they get too worn out to maintain the new, difficult behaviors.

Given that willpower is inherently limited, clients should have strategies to conserve it. Planning in advance for moments of weak self-control reinforces willpower when it is needed most. For example, when a client makes food choices when he or she is hungry or tired, the choices made are often of poor nutritional quality. A better strategy is to organize meals for the day in advance when the client has moments of greatest strength. Another effective strategy for conserving willpower is to think in advance about how to deal with specific obstacles as they arise. In a study on exercise and self-regulation, investigators found that people who wrote in a journal about how they would handle barriers to exercise were more likely to stick with an exercise program (Sniehotta et al., 2005). Another study found that journaling in advance about overcoming barriers helped people succeed at a challenging self-control task, even after a previous task had depleted their willpower (Webb & Sheeran, 2003).

REALISTIC GOALS, REALISTIC OBSTACLES

Realistic goals can only come from a realistic examination of the obstacles to health-behavior change. Many clients will have a history of starting and failing, often repeating the same patterns. The specific circumstances may change, but the client’s challenges—and reactions to those challenges—can provide insights for the coach into the obstacles to success that need to be discussed early on. There are two main steps to this process:

- Discover the potential obstacles to achieving the client’s goals.
- Help the client find solutions to navigate the obstacles before he or she faces them.

Identify Potential Obstacles

The pattern of starting a fitness program and then stopping the effort is familiar to many people. Often, at the start of a program, the client will be more focused and motivated because it is the beginning of a new endeavor. But there may be significant reasons why the client never enjoys real and lasting change. Uncovering these reasons is valuable information to the coach when developing a program. Furthermore, it is essential to reexamine the goals in light of any obstacles and discuss potential changes that may be warranted.

Common obstacles to health-behavior change—just like the motivations for health-behavior change—can be either internal or external. Internal obstacles relate to a client's attitudes, opinions, thoughts, feelings, and self-talk about health, fitness, exercise, or nutrition. External obstacles can include time, family, and work responsibilities.

Internal Obstacles

Even though someone may have secured the services of a coach to provide guidance to make change, there is often an unhealthy mindset in the client that can adversely affect his or her attitudes, thoughts, and feelings toward change. This type of individual has often tried several times to change and failed each time. There is also frequently a sense of loss of control of one's own choices. People often feel overwhelmed by daily demands, and their significant unhappiness with how they feel or look has eroded hope that change is possible. What develops from this are statements like "Exercise does not work for me," or "I have tried everything and nothing works." Statements such as these reflect a mindset of inability to change. Psychologist Carol Dweck (2008) refers to this as a fixed mindset, which is characterized by a deterministic view of the world, or in the language of fitness, a belief that health and fitness are determined by one's genes. As a result, they avoid challenges, give up easily, see effort as fruitless, and feel threatened by the success of others. It should be apparent that in this case, it is imperative for the coach to steer the client toward a growth mindset, which is characterized by a desire to learn and grow, embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, view effort as the path to improvement, and find lessons and inspiration in the success of others. To facilitate this change, the coach can simply begin to examine the potential challenges a client faces now and has faced previously in pursuit of health improvement. An important part of this is interviewing the client about what he or she feels could have been done to cope with challenges more effectively in the past and how he or she plans on coping with current challenges. This process helps the coach avoid the common practice of telling clients what to do and instead treat them like they possess the ability to find the best way around their own obstacles by facilitating the development of their own solutions.

For example, a client has admitted that he or she needs to drink more water. Instead of telling the client how much water to drink, the coach can ask more questions such as, "How will you ensure that you begin to drink more water?" and wait for the client's response. The client might have an idea about how best to achieve this goal. If the client needs help, then the coach can offer suggestions, while still allowing the client to choose which of the offered suggestions seems to be the most practical and suitable. For example, the coach may offer the following options to help the client achieve the goal of drinking more water:

- Always carry water in the car, at work, and throughout the daily routine.
- Link the behavior to something commonly done throughout the day, such as taking a sip of water every time the client sends a text message or email.
- When eating, the client can take a sip of water every three bites.

The client gets to choose which of these might work. If none of them are agreeable to the client, they still may inspire a new solution from the client. Either way, the client chooses which behavior(s) to use to achieve the goal, not the coach.

External Obstacles

Frequently, when discussing goals and the available time for commitment to the exercise and nutrition changes necessary, a client will provide the coach with best-case scenario answers. It is

important for the coach to gain an understanding of the realistic time available and motivation level of the client. This aids the coach in developing recommendations that will truly fit a client's life and avoid setting up a situation where the lifestyle changes are in direct competition with other priorities and commitments. A realistic examination of the opportunities for change remaining in a client's life, after including all the daily work and family responsibilities, is the first step in identifying external obstacles.

For example, a client may state that he or she has five days per week available to exercise, with 90 minutes per session. Upon further investigation, this might only be true if there are no traffic problems to and from work, if there are no major deadlines requiring extra work, and there are no school events that require getting the children to and from practices, games, or performances. It might also be true that the 90 minutes includes travel time to and from the gym, and time to park, get into the club, and change clothes. The client may have significantly less actual exercise time available given these considerations. If these factors are not uncovered initially and the coach simply proceeds with the program, the client will eventually feel the stress and pressure of the competing demands and the health program will often be what is compromised.



APPLY WHAT YOU KNOW

EVERYONE HAS TIME FOR RESULTS

Many people cite a lack of results as the reason they cease fitness programs, while a perceived lack of time is the most commonly cited reason why people do not begin exercising in the first place. It is

important to note how one often leads to the other. With full-time careers, children to raise, long commutes with long workdays (which often do not stop once people are home), there are many demands on people's time and energy. These significant time, family, and work commitments can overwhelm anyone's efforts to change, but are less likely to do so if clients are getting results or if they truly believe they will get meaningful results.

Typically, when someone begins to feel better, move more fluidly, or has clothes that fit better, the enthusiasm that ensues enables the person to overcome most obstacles to continued participation in a fitness program. Conversely, after the initial rush of enthusiasm passes, if someone is not getting results, the time and energy he or she devotes to the fitness program will seem less worthwhile and a few missed workouts may lead to complete relapse. Stated simply, people do not typically choose to continually devote time and energy to something that is providing no discernable positive benefit in return. If there is effort without reward, motivation wanes and the effort will soon disappear.

Consider the client from the "Preparing for Obstacles" sidebar earlier in this lesson. In this scenario, the client was guided to focus on what has improved—the increased ability to play with her kids—and reminded of the importance of this goal. Whenever someone is engaging in the right behaviors, there will be positive changes to discuss. Often, the client will focus on only the bigger parts of the goal and may need to be reminded of smaller goals that he or she has already expressed. The client may need to be encouraged to consider other signs of progress that he or she may not be aware of yet because of the focus on the larger goals.

Develop Solutions Before Problems Appear

It is best to have a client develop his or her own solutions to common obstacles so he or she develops improved reactions to challenges that are more in line with health goals. Another reason this is essential in the initial stages of a client-coach relationship is that this provides the client the opportunity to think of solutions when not actually facing an obstacle. When facing an obstacle that has historically thrown the client off course from his or her health goals, the most familiar path will be the one that is taken unless a different response has been planned.

Through facilitation by the coach, the client can gain confidence from the knowledge that there has been a different solution created in collaboration with a competent, caring fitness professional, and often the boost to morale that comes from this is enough to provide the client

with the motivation to successfully work through an obstacle. Simply altering the familiar path of facing obstacles alone without effective coping strategies is enough to enhance clients' abilities to successfully navigate challenges that had previously derailed their efforts. For example, a client may have a history of missing a workout or two, and then getting discouraged and engaging in negative self-talk. The powerful negative emotions take control and overshadow her desire to follow through on her efforts. After discussing this with the coach, the client has realized that she will not get in great shape from one or two workouts and, similarly, she will not get out of shape from missing one or two workouts. This has helped her keep a more long-term perspective on things.

EVERYONE IS GOOD AT SOMETHING

The widespread difficulty experienced by people from all walks of life in pursuit of health and fitness has created an interesting situation for fitness professionals. It is common to encounter people who are successful in their careers and in organizing home and family, and are very confident when performing tasks in those areas. Yet, when the topic turns to exercise, nutrition, or other health-related behaviors, many people lack confidence in their own abilities, are susceptible to the latest fads, and have difficulty keeping their goals in focus.

Everyone has an area where they are confident, capable, and in control, either professionally or at home. For example, a project manager can smoothly organize many people and tasks to achieve a larger objective. A parent might successfully manage multiple family schedules and get everyone where they need to be on time and well-fed. Some people may do both. If the coach reframes a health goal as a goal or project in areas where the client is already confident, the client can bring the same skills that he or she already possesses to bear on health goals. This helps the client uncover unrecognized strength.

People often compartmentalize their skills and abilities. For example, a client might describe herself as an excellent accountant, but have terrible nutrition and exercise habits. The attention to detail and organizational skills required to be a successful accountant are not that different from those required to successfully follow through on lifestyle change. The same could be said of any worthwhile pursuit of a professional or personal nature. The coach can present to clients the idea that they already possess the skills necessary for successful lifestyle change by pointing out the areas in which the client is already confident and capable. Many people will appreciate—and perhaps even be a bit surprised by—this fresh take on their abilities to succeed.

A simple way to introduce this concept is to ask clients what they are good at now. Then ask them if they were good at it the first time they did it or before they were experienced or practiced? *Everything in life is hard before it is easy.* From learning the alphabet to mastering calculus, anything new is hard until it has been done often enough for the person to get better at it. This is a simple but important lesson for many clients.

DECISIONAL BALANCE WORKSHEET

Even though the benefits of making positive lifestyle changes are readily apparent, it would surprise some coaches to know that in the minds of many individuals, there are also benefits to *not* making those changes. During the assessment process, it can be useful for the coach to use a decisional balance worksheet with clients (Figure 1-2). This classic concept was developed by psychologists Janis and Mann in the 1960s and used as a way to look at decision-making (Janis & Mann, 1977). The balance sheet recognizes that both gains and losses can be consequences of a



single decision. The balance sheet is a place to record the advantages and disadvantages of different options facing an individual. Clients can use this tool to detail everything that could affect their decision to make changes. The client writes down all of his or her positive and negative perceptions about exercise (or any other health-related behavioral change), which helps him or her connect with the benefits of change and remove barriers to change.

Figure 1-2
Sample
decisional
balance
worksheet

BEHAVIOR	DISADVANTAGES	ADVANTAGES
Continue to not exercise	Cannot play with kids Have to buy new clothes Depression Low energy	More free time Easier
Begin to exercise	Requires a lot of effort Takes up time More laundry from workouts	More confidence Better mood Better problem-solving skills Feel better in clothes Less back pain Feel more attractive

Any behavioral change will have pros and cons—even behaviors that are unequivocally positive. Clients can sometimes experience a sense of ambivalence, wherein they sometimes see a real need for change, but sometimes feel it is simply not worth the effort. The decisional balance worksheet helps the coach and the client ensure that there is motivation toward the desired changes for health improvement. The coach can give the client a blank worksheet with instructions to either complete it in advance of the first session or together with the coach—whichever is most relevant and convenient for the client.

SUMMARY

A realistic approach to goal-setting involves going beyond the first answer to the question, “What are your health and fitness goals?” Gathering additional details surrounding a client’s goals will enable the coach to understand the motivations for the goals, their relevance to the client, and the potential obstacles the client faces. It is imperative for the coach to discover why the client’s goals matter and how the client’s health efforts will connect to what the client values in life. This information will help the coach provide guidance for the client to overcome obstacles and challenges. By knowing what the client values, the coach can help ensure that goals are relevant for the client by framing the lifestyle behaviors in terms of those values. This understanding will greatly amplify the quality of the experience the client has with the coach and allow the achievement of results that are perhaps even better than the client expects.

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