

April's Issue: Setting and Achieving Goals in Health and Wellness

A hero's journey is a transformative process filled with many challenges and triumphs. This is true of one's health journey as well. For many, the health journey is typically not a linear progression but rather encompasses a mix of detours, plateaus, successes, and frustrations. It is important to celebrate the victories achieved along the way, no matter how small they may seem. Small changes over time can have major, positive health impacts on goals such as improving quality of life and reducing chronic disease risk.

Goal setting is an evidence-based practice utilized by many health and wellness experts. When starting out, it is important to identify a clear and defined long-term goal. For example, an individual may desire to improve their blood lipid profile and blood pressure. Once a long-term goal is identified, consider how it could be broken into smaller, actionable components such as improvements to nutrition, physical activity, and lifestyle practices. Short-term goals should then be created for each of the actionable areas of focus.

DESIGNING SHORT-TERM GOALS

Short-term goals need to be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-oriented (SMART). It can be helpful to write these goals down and post them in areas you will see throughout the day to provide additional motivation and encouragement. Some common places may include the bathroom mirror, bedside nightstand, refrigerator door, or computer screen. Short-term goals should ideally be completed within one to three weeks and embody all the SMART characteristics. For example:

- I will eat at least 1 serving of fruit or vegetables every day this week.
- I will walk for at least 30 minutes, four days this week.
- I will not eat in front of the TV or computer screen at least 3 times this week.

Short-term goals provide a series of small milestones that make up the path towards a long-term goal. They will help you stay motivated, maintain productivity, and minimize procrastination. Additionally, short-term goals allow you to focus on one thing at a time. With each short-term goal accomplished, another step along the path towards your overarching goal is taken.

During your health transformation journey, it is important to check-in on your progress. Ask questions like, "How do I feel about my current goals? Have I been accomplishing the short-term goals that I set for myself? Do I need to adjust any of my goals?" Taking time each week to reflect on your progress allows you an opportunity to celebrate your accomplishments, identify causes for shortcomings, and remind yourself of the plan. Keeping quantifiable data is very useful when tracking progress. Whether it's a box checking system, a line graph, or a simple tally system, try to develop a method that allows you to visualize how far you've come.

Keep in mind that health journeys evolve. Successes will occur and obstacles or unforeseen challenges will present themselves. These encounters may act as barriers to your long-term health goal but can also be opportunities for learning and growth. Adjusting short-term goals to work through challenges will help you overcome obstacles and achieve the long-term goals you desire. They act as rungs on a ladder leading you, step-by-step, to the top.