

Caregiver's Guide to Setting Goals

Does this sound familiar? Something happens – a milestone birthday, a financial emergency, or a new year – and you resolve to get in shape, save money, or be a better person. Then time passes, life gets in the way, and you forget about your goals until you step on the scale or another unexpected expense pops up. Over time, guilt and feelings of failure can build up.

Often, whether you meet your goals is less about willpower or dedication and more about how you phrase the goals. You may be setting yourself up to fail, without even knowing it!

Next time you decide to do something, follow these three guidelines.

1. Set realistic goals.

Make sure that your goal fits into your life. Say you want to save \$10,000. If you try to do it in a year, you'll need to put away \$192 every week. If you can afford to set aside only \$40 a week, you might want to make it a 5-year goal instead.

2. Make goals specific.

State your goal using concrete, specific words, and come up with measurable steps to achieve it. Maybe your mother has dementia, and you sometimes get impatient when she asks the same questions over and over. You think, "I need to be nicer. She can't help it." But being "nicer" is a hard thing to measure. What exactly does it mean?

Instead, you might try coming up with three things to do that could help you be more patient.

- I'll get more sleep so I won't be so tired and crabby.
- I'll listen to upbeat music instead of the news during my commute.
- I'll count to 10 – and maybe think “patience” – before I react to Mom's questions.

3. State goals as positive actions.

We often state goals in terms of what we *won't* do – we won't drink soda or eat junk food, for example – instead of saying what we *will* do. If your goal is to eat better, be specific about what “better” means and come up with a plan.

If you need to cut out fat, for example, you might decide:

- Three days a week, I'll have soup and vegetables for lunch instead of a deli sandwich with cheese and mayo.
- The other two days, I'll have a sandwich, but I'll have grapes or baby carrots instead of chips.

Staying on Track

If you fall short on meeting your goals, skip the guilt trip and take another look at the goals you set.

- Were they realistic?
- Where did you struggle?
- What *were* you able to accomplish?

Focus on the goals that are most important to you, and make a plan that includes specific steps to help you meet them.

Try to keep the changes small and easy to work into your routine. By avoiding the all-or-nothing mentality, you'll find that you're more likely to stay with the new habits – and see

a boost in your well-being.