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How Can I Set Realistic Goals?

Tom Lee

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Set Realistic Goals?

Tom Lee answers:*

Resolutions that are casually made and casually worked on aren't likely to be kept. Goals, however, that are reasonable, specific, measurable and that can be broken down into parts are great stepping stones to personal growth and accomplishment.

In 1953, Yale University surveyed its graduating class and discovered that only 3 percent had written goals. Twenty years later, Yale surveyed the same class and learned that the 3 percent who had written goals had amassed a net worth greater than that of the other 97 percent combined. According to Keith Ellis, author of "Goal Setting for People Who Hate to Set Goals," the moral of the story is that goals work, but almost nobody uses them. As the new year begins, it may be worthwhile to review some criteria for effective goal setting.

- **Be reasonable.** If a goal is unrealistic, you won't try to pursue it and you will fall back into your old habits after only a few weeks or even days. Set a goal that builds on your strengths and that you believe is achievable.
- **Be specific.** The more specific the goal, the more real it becomes as you visualize yourself achieving it. General ideas such as make more money, be happier or date more won't motivate you as much as specific objectives that you can visualize clearly and that enable you to see your progress.
- **Break the goal into daily tasks.** Unless you plan steps to be taken on a daily basis toward your goal, it will remain vague and will be easy to forget. Place reminders in a planner or a note on the mirror or desk to keep goals on your mind. Outline steps that can be built into your daily routine. If you can make the steps become habits, reaching the goal becomes the natural result.
- **Measure your achievements.** There are two parts to measure--the daily tasks that lead to the goal and the final goal itself. Though some goals are easier to chart than others, marking off a calendar or chart can motivate you as you see your progress.

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* Tom Lee is Utah State University Extension Family and Human Development Specialist