



Help People Set Healthy Goals

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Goal setting is part of our created, human design. God made human beings to have agency and mastery. We want to pursue worthy things that are purposeful, not only for self-improvement but also for meaningful impact on the lives of others and society. However, because people tend to turn good things into ultimate things, goals can easily become unhealthy: something they must accomplish to feel good about who they are or numb the pain of their past. So, how do we, as caregivers, help the people we serve stay motivated to pursue their goals without turning them into demands, a weight, or a burden leading to self-condemnation? This Toolkit shares some practical ways to guide someone through setting goals.

1. Invite God into the process

of setting goals, encouraging them to set dedicated time with God as they think through their goals for the year, while being open to His direction for their lives in the next season.

1. Have them consider ways that God has been working in their life currently. With those reflections in mind, help them set/evaluate which goals are more likely His leading. Based on what they know about the scripture or in personal times with God, are there areas where they feel led to give up something or to start something new?
2. Help them articulate why God may want them to give up something or to start something new.

2. Reflect on and evaluate past “failed” goals

to help them learn about themselves and receive deeper healing. What they perceive to be failures are opportunities to learn and experience more of his grace.

1. Lead with compassion and curiosity as you help them explore past “failures” and say, “Tell me about a past goal that you really pursued, but did not achieve.”
2. Ask them to identify and name the negative self-talk that perpetuates their cycle of unhelpful/harmful responses such as, “You should be ashamed.” “You blew it again.” The negative self-talk usually stems from past wounds, which need deeper healing. Identifying and reflecting on the messages will increase their awareness of their own heart condemning the self (1 John 3:19-20) and where the gospel identity has to deepen their healing.

3. Facilitate an encounter with Christ. As they reflect on their negative self-talk, ask them to imagine how Jesus would feel toward or say to the parts of themselves that are wounded by past hurts and failures. Prompt them to ask God to relieve them of their burden and negative messages and replace them with a kind word from Him.

3. Reset and start fresh with reasonable expectations.

When they are more assured of God’s acceptance and love, it is easier to pursue their goals with greater persistence without making the goals into demands. Well-intended goals are helpful and healthy. However, even with good intentions and support, people still fall short, so help them have reasonable expectations. The patterns that they developed in their life story may act as a default they revert back to. This often happens automatically and without awareness.

1. Remind them that change is hard and at times they will find themselves reverting back to their old patterns. Help them not grow discouraged because they are learning and growing even in moments that feel like a setback.
2. Encourage curiosity about their responses and be willing to revise their goals with them. Their goals should not be absolutes but should be flexible depending on what is going on inside of them as well as the unforeseen situations that they may be facing. Rather than a results-focused approach, focus on faithfulness and perseverance.

4. Surrender goals to God

helping them be more assured that God is behind their goals and trusting that he will complete the work he started in them (Phil. 1:6)

1. Help them to acknowledge and confess their inherent tendency to turn any good goal into something they must accomplish to feel good about themselves and ask God for greater awareness of this tendency.
2. Pray in faith. Have them ask Him for protection so that their goals do not become an unconscious strategy for self-assertion.

5. Enlist support from those who are honest and encouraging.

They need a community of people who know them well to gauge how realistic their goals are, provide helpful feedback, and encourage them along the way. Help them put together a support network.

1. If you remain a part of their supportive community, talk through what's working and what is not, keeping in mind that additional struggles with internal messages may surface along the way. They may need space to process those messages with you before they can take in any practical advice. Recognize places where they need kindness and forgiveness and places where they need a firm, gentle challenge while always pointing them back to their identity as children of God. Rely on their motivation more than your own. You cannot want the goal for them more than they want it for themselves.
2. Consider other supportive communities as well. Do they need additional support beyond a friend or a spouse? A Bible Study? A like-minded group, like an AA meeting, weight-loss support group, DBT group, etc?

6. Celebrate and give thanks.

1. Make it a practice to notice when they are meeting their goals, getting closer to the goals, or reorienting and resetting after a failure. Celebrate all of these. Encourage them to celebrate even the "failures" because they learn so much from them.
2. Help them give thanks for their desire to pursue goals, the perseverance in the pursuit, the lessons from the failures, and the caring people around them. Thank God when their goals, instead of overwhelming them, now help them move toward their ultimate vision of themselves, their purpose, and meaning in life in Him.

Setting our intentions and focus to grow is a worthy endeavor, but we were never meant to go it alone. Healthy goals are best set and achieved in community. We can encourage and help people connect to God, to reflect and heal, and to pursue goals from a heart that is reassured of His love and acceptance.