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Can our GOALS be counter-productive?

More fitness ambitions pencilled into your calendar than post-lockdown social plans? Well, according to the experts, there's a case for stripping them back

WORDS | *Chantelle Pattemore*

Whether you're new to exercise or ramping up an existing routine, chances are you've got at least one goal that encourages you to don your workout kit regularly. Perhaps it's to hit a personal best, lose some weight by a specific date, hit 10,000 steps a day, or lift a heavier set of weights. Having goals can help motivate us, however, it's important to remember they're not the be-all-and-end-all. "Sometimes, I think we put ourselves under too much pressure," states Luke Goulden, personal trainer and coach (lukegoulden.com). In fact, putting excess focus and value on targets might actually hinder your progress – and even your enjoyment.

MISSING THE TARGET

If research is anything to go by, the reality of goal-setting isn't always as positive as the intentions behind doing so. One US study of people who had fitness targets as their New Year's resolution found 73 percent gave up before the finish line, while University of Scranton researchers put the rate of resolution success at a meagre eight percent. But why are these so low? According to mental health therapist Miyume McKinley (miyumemckinley.com), a key element behind failure is feeling overwhelmed. "Setting too many goals can be counterproductive if you do not allow yourself enough time to complete your tasks," she says. "If we try to accomplish too many goals at once, we may not be able to complete the tasks to our best ability and this could hinder us from achieving our desired goals altogether." You can also feel overwhelmed by just a single goal, especially if it's an ambitious one. For example, if you've never run before and aim to complete a marathon in six months' time, it's

going to feel incredibly daunting. This sense of overwhelm is closely associated with another factor researchers believe lies behind our failure to achieve goals: self-efficacy. A number of studies have found those who don't have the self-belief they can reach their targets, often won't attain success. Meanwhile, those who believe their goal is realistically attainable are far more likely to achieve it. "Constantly aiming to change certain aspects of your body or constantly chasing a personal best can be exhausting, and demoralising if you feel you're not making enough progress quick enough," says Jemma Thomas, personal trainer and founder of Jemma's Health Hub (jemashealthhub.com). "But the fact is, if you're exercising and it's making you feel better, then that is the only goal you should focus on." Add in other factors, such as time and money constraints, comparing yourself to others, and lack of willpower, and the outlook doesn't seem too bright. So should you ditch

your goals altogether? Absolutely not, argue the experts – instead, approach them differently and switch up your mindset.

ON TARGET

There's certainly nothing wrong with having goals: they can motivate you, keep you focused and help create a sense of happiness and satisfaction. But everyone exercises for different reasons – so if you don't have goals, that's OK too. "Go for a run because you know it's good for your health, go to the gym because you like how it makes you feel, [or] go swimming because it's a nice break from the stresses that sometimes come with life," says Goulden. "Take the pressure off yourself and exercise because of how it makes you subjectively feel." As with most things in life, it's all about balance – and finding the blend that works for you could be the key to elevating both your exercise routine and your wellbeing, to new heights.





“Putting excess focus and value on targets might actually hinder your progress – and enjoyment”



MOVE THE GOALPOSTS

“The process of goal-setting is the best way to get clarity about your priorities and what you would like to achieve,” says Abbie Watkins, personal trainer from OriGym Centre of Excellence (origympersonaltrainercourses.co.uk). “Setting goals forces you to think about what is important to you, which can act as a source of motivation to make positive changes within your life.” Plus, we all know how great it feels when we achieve something, and that added rush of endorphins is something to relish. “It’s usually that fulfilling feeling that spurs us on to push ourselves even further to get what we want,” Watkins notes. Here are some ways you can start setting sustainable and healthy goals:

LOOK AT THE BIGGER PICTURE

Goals don’t always have to be aesthetic or PB-based. Consider how exercise will positively impact your life in other areas. “Ask yourself, ‘If I exercise today or this week, will my concentration be better, will my sleep improve, will I be more relaxed?’” suggests Goulden. “Get clear on how exercise will support you and your values.”

BE REALISTIC

The thought of reaching pro-tennis player level by summer might seem nice but, in reality, it’s quite unattainable. Set yourself a goal that’s challenging but still achievable, and science says there’s a greater chance you’ll stick with it: one study saw a 90 percent success rate with this approach compared to setting easy targets.

CREATE A PLAN

Goulden believes this is a must-have in goal-setting. “Overwhelm is usually just a sign there is no plan, and no plan leads to frustration,” he says. “Create a goal for yourself, have complete clarity, and plan how the journey looks and what you need to be doing on a daily basis.” This is an approach McKinley agrees with. “When we are clear on the goals we are working towards and the steps necessary to achieve them, we are more likely to succeed in accomplishing them,” she notes.

START SMALL

“A lot of the time, people get carried away when setting goals, usually because they feel really motivated to make things happen and excited about the prospect of achieving [them],” Watkins explains. “To avoid this, it’s best to start simple, take things step-by-step, and focus on one thing at a time.”

PREPARE FOR HURDLES

The chances of the road to success being entirely smooth-sailing is (unfortunately) minimal – but don’t let this put you off. “It’s not supposed to be easy. If it was easy, you wouldn’t grow,” states Goulden. “Prepare for sometimes taking a step back to take two forward. Focus on progress, not perfection, and believe in yourself.”

MAKE IT MEASURABLE

We’re more likely to stick with something if we can see our progress along the way and not have to wait until the finishing point to taste that thrill of success. As Watkins notes: “Ensuring your goal is measurable means you can keep track of your progress, and makes it much easier to gauge whether you are progressing in the right direction.”

KEEP THINGS FUN

Exercise should be enjoyable, and goals should amplify rather than hinder this. “Those who enjoy their exercise will usually be more consistent, and adherence will also be higher,” Goulden reveals. **HEW**