

Setting your goals

We all need something to look forward to in the future. The more exciting and the more meaningful to us that thing is, the greater our sense of motivation. Choose your goals and your motivations very carefully for just that reason.

You will need goals for each arena of your life: personal, extracurricular, working, and spiritual. Your goals need to be compatible with each other. They've got to pull you in pretty much the same direction, otherwise you'll run into trouble.

It helps enormously if you can succeed in identifying an attractive goal of some sort. The goal might change in the months or years to come, but it can help carry you through a difficult episode in your life. This goal doesn't have to be specific, it can be as general as simply wanting to make the most of your life.

To get the best from life you have to be enjoying it. Enjoyment should be a key goal.

You have to know quite specifically what you want from life, otherwise you set yourself an impossible target. Make goals very specific. The more specific the better. Under close scrutiny, you might discover that your goal is not the thing you want, but that it's the *feeling* associated with the goal which is what you're really after. Then, at least, you can wonder what else might be good sources of those sought-after feelings.

Make your life thoughtful and deliberate rather than accidental. Try to anticipate what the future holds or could realistically hold so that you can prepare yourself for it.

Every goal you set yourself will have a cost. Weigh-up the likely cost against the likely benefits. It's easy to find attractive goals, but not so easy to find attractive goals which require journeys you can't wait to undertake.

Take a very reality-oriented approach to life. Never lose site of how things really are, rather than how you'd like them to be. Then at least you've got a chance of improving them.

Excellence in any field of endeavour depends on three basic factors: (1) how clearly you know where you want to go; (2) how much you really want to get there; (3) how strongly you believe in your ability to do so.

High-accomplishment and life-satisfaction are very often associated with those individuals who invest considerable time and effort in strategically planning their future. These people think in terms of the long-range and are more willing to postpone gratification of their immediate desires. Such individuals reflect on their lives more than others by deploying regular and detailed consideration of the events of their daily lives in the light of their longer-term aspirations.

If you set yourself one goal, what other goals are you postponing? Are you sure that's the order you want to take them in?

Life can't be forced and you can't absolutely guarantee things will work out just as you planned - sometimes the timing will be wrong. But you can at least give yourself the best chance possible.

You can't eliminate risks, you can only reduce them to a level that is acceptable to you. What are the chances of things going wrong? What are your contingency plans if they do? Don't have one back-up, have two.

It is vital that you set your own goals rather than having someone else set them for you. Taking ownership of your decisions will greatly increase your commitment and motivation.

You are half way to achieving your goal if you define it very clearly and know exactly why it's important to you.

Identifying what is really most important to us, is one of the hardest things. Not getting accidentally side-tracked by less important goals is the second.

You have to think that you and your goals are worth it. Are you doing it for someone else, or are you doing it for yourself?

Choose for yourself where you head and how you get there, then at least if you fail, you will fail on your own terms. Don't fail on someone else's - that feels twice as bad.

Give your so-called 'frivolous dreams' some time to ignite. Chase them like crazy! Not indefinitely, of course, but for a couple of years until they deal with themselves one way or another. You'll not regret that.

Be happy on the way to the goal. That's the key. Don't wait for the achievement of the goal to bring all the rewards. It won't and can't and shouldn't.

It's helpful to have goals, but those goals shouldn't just be about reaching the finishing line, they should be about the journey along the way. Your goals could include things like 'enjoy the companionship'.

The trick with an ambitious project is to set yourself mini-targets that lead bit by bit towards the greater goal.

A common error is to set only long-term, far-off goals. Whereas long-term goals can help with self-motivation, you will also need lots of very small and achievable daily goals that will lead inevitably to your final destination.

There is no point setting yourself extremely high goals that will only stress you out. Take it inches at a time. You can always build up speed and ambition as your confidence and ability grow.

Don't aim to do things 'just in time'. Don't take things to the wire. Aim to do them well before time, and then coast in. That just takes good planning.

Not giving ourselves time to do a decent job is a very common mistake, and one easily made when planning. You have to allow time to improve the plan, to brief your colleagues, to do the job, to research and review what you've done, to sit back and consider how to put all the problems right and repeat most of the process. Many people plan things as if nothing will go wrong, no one will get sick, no revisions will be necessary. Such a plan is likely to prove as comfortable as running a marathon in a wet suit.

You set the standard to achieve, then you set a higher standard, and then a higher standard on top of that. That's how you grow to reach great heights.

You never think you're going to be really good at something when you're just starting out, but take it one step at a time and aim to keep progressing. Your confidence and skills will build with each new stage, and after a while some new target will come into view and seem almost possible and just within reach. When you look back two years down the line, you won't believe how far you've come.

Find yourself a good coach who can help you look three or five years ahead to a highly exciting, strongly motivating future, and can help you plan strategically. That coach will also be an ally against some of the pressures, mental and physical, that you will come up against on route.

It's impossible to stand still in life. You either improve or you wither. It's moving forward that brings a sense of contentment and pleasure.

If you enjoyed the above section, you might like to take a look at these:

- **Finding your passion**
- **Your values and priorities**
- **Developing through new experiences**

Getting started & staying on target

Self-discipline is one of the touchstones of success in any goal you set yourself. To work out how you achieve self-discipline you have to know what motivates you, what routines and incentives work best for you.

If you make promises to yourself about what you'll achieve and how you'll reward yourself, learn to keep them.

Don't take advantage of the many excuses that always present themselves for failing in your ambition. See if you can't push things through.

Be persistent and tenacious and hang on until you decide that's enough. Don't be thrown off the merry-go round. Try to choose when to jump and where you'll fall.

Persistence goes a very long in any sphere. God knows how much stuff I sent off to people in the early days, how much I hawked the ideas around. The old lady in the post office used to complain that I didn't leave enough stamps for her other customers. My work didn't get discovered by accident - I beat down the door.

Every second out there, you have to be trying to do your best. If you feel it's not working, stop and remotivate yourself.

Choose someone you respect and ask them to coach you in some aspect of life.

Try what the Harvard Psychologist Howard Gardner calls 'reflecting' - which is a commitment to a regular, very deliberate consideration of the events of your daily life in relation to your longer-term aspirations.

Always think about what your ultimate aim is, then that can act as a flashing beacon to help you decide whether one direction or opportunity or another is consistent with your aim.

One of the best ways to gain some really useful 'doing' skills, is to do some sort of community service project: volunteer your time, set up a school magazine, offer training to younger people, put on a show, a concert or a gig to raise money for a good cause. Try to partner up with a friend, because you'll learn more, enjoy it more, and achieve more. It might appear to be unpaid, but the truth you'll be earning pride and know-how in spades.

If you can devise ways of measuring things, it's easier to keep track of improvements.

Make damn sure you are paddling in the right direction, and check your compass on a regular basis because it's all too easy to go off course.

As you implement your plan, circumstances beyond your control may often force you to adapt it and to become reactive, but then as soon as possible you must draft a new plan, and so take back the initiative. Don't lead life reactively, lead it proactively. You make the first move and the next and the next whenever possible.

On any mission, keep open to changes of plan and new possibilities that can bring dramatic, if last minute, improvements. Keep looking ahead and be ready to adapt, rather than committing rigidly to one course of action 'come what may'.

Perfectionism can be self-destructive and inefficient and it can become more of a bad habit bordering on an addiction rather than a philosophy. Does the job really need to be done perfectly, or would a good job do?

There are no shortcuts to success; you have to work hard, and if you don't, your star will fade very quickly.

It's only because of the battles and hardships that the end result of a journey is given meaning. Whereas if the end result is somehow 'magically acquired', the prize will soon feel little more than meaningless.

There are certain chores you just have to do to get to where you're going, and the clever thing is to make them as enjoyable as possible so you do them as well as possible. That might mean introducing music, or companionship, or regular breaks, or in some way elevating that chore above the mundane.

Make sure you can be trusted to do a task *thoroughly*. This may not be exciting, but it is vital. This may mean you coming back to a task time and again over a long period; but it is worth it.

Voltaire wrote "All that is needed for evil to triumph, is that good people do nothing."

Actions are the bottom line, so do judge yourself by measurable outcomes - but remain aware that enjoying yourself for 365 days of the year is a real-life outcome just as much as the examination result at the end of that year.

Be aware that even your best friends and family may not wholeheartedly encourage you to major changes to your life. After all, major changes might mean you have less time for them, or you might eclipse their own achievements, or cause them to question the rightness of their own path or progress.

The day isn't won till the whistle goes. Don't let emotion get the better of you until you've got the job done. Be tough with yourself and keep a tight rein.

Hard work is not a substitute for strategy, and achieving your goals needs both in equal amounts.

It's a key thing knowing when *quitting* would be the brave and smart thing to do, rather than an impatient and negative move as it's often thought to be. Seek advice from experienced people who know you well.

You must take responsibility for motivating yourself. Ask yourself why is this task important, what will be the short, medium and long-term benefits to yourself and those you care for? What are the private, internal satisfactions, and what are the visible, tangible rewards? Keep reminding yourself of these features to keep your appetite for the job as sharp as possible.

If you are not doing things that you feel you should, stop and ask yourself why. You might find its because your goals aren't what you want to do, but what someone else wants you to do. Or maybe you're just bloody terrified of the tasks themselves. In which case, take them one at a time, break each one into little pieces and work your way through the problem. Or maybe you're punishing yourself for not having achieved other things. Self-punishment is only one step away from self-hatred, which is not helpful when you're trying to get through daily life.

Know when to stop at something, draw a line underneath it, and take off for other challenges. Improvise upon your theme.

Almost all the benefit of the struggle comes toward the very end of the battle - that is the time when capacity for patience or strength or endurance is increased beyond its original boundaries. So don't let go of the rope until you've notched up that little bit extra.

If you enjoyed the above section, you might like to take a look at these:

- **Your attitude your problems**
- **Finding a balance in life**
- **Renewing your energy & enthusiasm**

Performing well under pressure

Accomplishment will be a natural by-product of doing the things you believe in and that you enjoy.

If you need to perform under pressure, be sure to practice under pressure: perhaps take 5 minutes off the time you'd have in the exam room, and try to create the same conditions of noise and other distractions. For instance, try writing an essay in a busy room, or put yourself in situations where you are focusing on a task while other people are watching.

Your distinguishing ability will be how calm and effective you can remain when playing the big points.

Look hard at the best innings you've ever played, whether on the sports field or in the boardroom or in the exam hall, and see what you were getting right. At the very least it will boost your confidence, and might offer you some helpful reminders. Mentally replay your previous 'best performances' and recall the level of feelings and focus required to achieve them. Don't just visualise the picture, build in the sound and smell and touch and taste as well. Build in the emotions.

It helps to overkill irrational fears. For instance, if you fear spiders, then you need to reach a stage where you keep a pet spider for a while. One way of helping yourself achieve this is to get really relaxed and then imagine some aspects of the feared thing. Don't let your fear-level rise when you do so. Eventually you should be able to build up to a level whereby you can imagine very vividly and for a long time the feared thing without getting anxious. Then you can start the process again with *real life* exposures. It's vital not to rush this very gradual process. The feared situation, whether at the stage you experience it for real or simply imagine it, must only push you a little bit further each time, and stick with that level until your anxiety completely goes away. You have to conquer your fear at each stage.

Two key elements in top performance under pressure, whether in an athletics competition or a crisis situation, are *good preparation* and very *realistic training* - and these both require mental rehearsal and physical practice for all the future possibilities.

If you stay long enough in a basically harmless but nonetheless feared situation, the fear will exhaust itself, and if you repeat this process several times soon after, you will be cured of your phobia. This goes for fear of public speaking, fear of spiders, fear of enclosed spaces, fear of heights, fear of doing exams or important performances of one sort or another, fear of... well, you name it.

Worry serves little purpose. If there's a problem or the prospect of one, try to work out exactly what it is that's worrying you. For example, is the task ahead worrying you because there's an audience, or is it some other feature of the event. This exact understanding of what's worrying you will allow you to determine a suitable solution or make appropriate preparations.

When it comes to written exams, study past question-papers thoroughly, and then do as much real practice as you can. Try to get those practice tests graded by your tutor. Also, know exactly what's on the exam syllabus and what the examiner will be allowed to give points for.

You, better than anyone, should know your strengths and weaknesses in the lead up to exams. Negotiate with the tutor to make sure you tailor your last 12 weeks to meet your specific needs.

When preparing for examinations, sleep well, eat well and use relaxation as part of your work-strategy, so as not to end up resenting work or burning out.

Styles of mental preparation, motivation, and coping are unique to each individual. Experiment in the safety of the training situation and find what works for you.

Anyone who tells you they are not afraid when they go out there to compete or to be challenged, has never been successful. They are afraid of losing or of coming up short. Bear in mind the opposition are going to be just as frightened of you as you are of them.

Self-sabotage is very common, much more common than we probably realise. It shows itself in hoping things will go 'accidentally' wrong before the big game, the big exam, or the big date, so that either we don't have to do the feared thing at all, or we have an excuse for messing things up. For instance, we hope to get the flu, to split up with our partner, to be robbed, to have a crash, to lose our bag, to have a bad night's sleep...anything, absolutely anything...rather than go through with the feared thing.

High *energy* levels and low anxiety levels, are the best way to face a big challenge on any particular day. Elite sports people are often very good at achieving this combination. Don't allow your energy to expend in over-excitement. Learn to relax and conserve your energies.

You have to practice overcoming distractions and focusing totally on the task for the entire performance of it. That requires high quality mental-imagery, training, and competition-experience.

Everyone is scared and anxious over things that matter to them, it's just that some people have learnt better than others how to cope with those feelings. Fear isn't inadequacy, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. The important thing is not to let these feelings stop you. Not trying would be the only way that you could possibly let yourself down.

Before a major performance, you'll be feeling anxious and scared, so just focus firmly on the task in hand. This will help block out all the other distractions. Take the job step by step, and keep asking yourself what you need to do now and in the next two minutes, so you don't get spooked by the whole task ahead. Don't panic yourself by staring mesmerised at the whole mountain to be climbed. Don't focus on what the result might be in 45 minutes time; focus only on the task this next minute and then the minute after.

Performance is a time for connecting with the moment in hand rather than reflecting on the situation.

Play for yourself. The moment you start thinking about all the people who want various things for you and from you, your focus is taken away from the task at hand. Don't let your thoughts drift to what others' expect of you.

Top sports players don't fear making a mistake early in a game or early in a season, because they know that it will almost certainly spur them on to try even harder.

The dangerous thing is to break concentration, to think that you're on the way to winning. Before you know it, you start imagining collecting the trophy and what you'll say to your fans. That loss of concentration will lose you the match. Play each point on its own merits. Don't get ahead of yourself.

High-achievement isn't accidental or a complete enigma, it is the result of at least one specific strategy: a great deal of practice.

Although we cannot map out lives in advance, much can be done to make desirable outcomes more likely. Acquiring an exceptional ability is one such outcome.

Mastery of your moods is the personal skill that differentiates the good athlete from the Olympic Gold medallist. If I were asked to name one mental characteristic that distinguishes the very finest athletes, it would be their ability to focus and refocus their concentration in the face of distractions.

Most personal qualities and practical skills are 'transferable' - which means you can probably do more than one thing well, and take enormous pleasure in doing so. The more practice and first-hand experience you can have of such things as planning projects, meeting deadlines, turning crises around and working with people, the better you will be at everything and anything you turn your hand to.

Surprise is a wonderfully effective ingredient if you can add it to any performance.

The best individuals are in competition with themselves rather than the people around them.

If you enjoyed the above section, you might like to take a look at these:

- **Succeeding in your work environment**
- **Tackling depression, stress and exhaustion**
- **Landing a job**

Managing your time

Allow at least 25% more time than you've calculated for achieving your big goals, because there will always be unanticipated demands and opportunities, for instance, you never know when you might fall in love.

Try to make a plan at the beginning of the week to see where the days will be invested. Day by day planning is prone to lose a sense of the ultimate goals and priorities.

Set specific and comfortably achievable daily goals so that you know what you expect to accomplish every day.

If you do one thing, then you are by necessity saying "no" to doing something else. Be sure that's a conscious decision and you are aware of the opportunities you're turning down.

Be careful to what you commit yourself. It's very easy to feel important saying 'yes' to everything and everyone, then feel a fool when you let everyone down. Only take things on if you have the time and inclination to do them well, with lots of room to spare for the unexpected.

What's important is to act *preventively* to avert crises on the horizon, otherwise all you will ever be doing is reacting to crises.

Make sure you've made a considered decision on what really warrants your immediate attention. Once you're clear about such things, it feels a lot easier to say 'No, not yet' to seemingly urgent tasks that other people are pressing you for, but which you have confidently deemed not quite so urgent.

There are things that are very important in your life, like emotional-expression, physical exercise, and time with friends, but they aren't urgent. With this in mind, we mustn't let there be too many *urgent* things so that the important things get left out. This requires planning ahead, and saying 'No' when needs be, and of not being so greedy as to take on too much. It helps to remember that when you're saying 'No' to a tempting offer, you're actually saying 'Yes' to more important things. And when you're saying 'Yes', you're in effect saying 'No' to a whole range of other opportunities.

Keep a balance on route. Don't let your passion blind you to the other pillars of your life: your friends, your loved ones, your recreations.

You've got to be able to measure progress, so keep an eye on the clock and the calendar. Know what you need to achieve by when, then you'll know if you're on target. Find someone who can act as coach to whom you can report your progress.

Self-organisation is a key contributor to consistently high-performance over long periods of time. This requires a good grasp of how best to apportion your time and energy throughout the day and the week, work-time and leisure-time alike.

Is your use of your time each day and each week totally in line with your values in life? For instance, if you think that personal relationships are a real priority, then watching soaps for 5 hours per week could better be spent on the phone with friends, or making time so that you can have an afternoon with a loved one at the weekend. It's not uncommon to be accidentally allotting large chunks of our time to things or people for very out-dated reasons. Re-evaluate your life-priorities and reflect these in how much time you afford various things.

It is a crucial skill to be able to discriminate what is a key task that needs full attention, compared to what may be an interesting, attractive but none the less trivial task.

There's a huge pleasure in being organised, in completing things ahead of time rather than rushing to meet deadlines. Things always take up more time than you imagine they will because of preparation time and settling back into things.

You need rules for yourself about the *minimum* time you should spend with friends and loved ones and enjoying yourself, otherwise day to day pressures simply bully those essential ingredients out of your timetable. It is those essentials that give life quality and meaning.

If you enjoyed the above section, you might like to take a look at these:

- **Finding a balance**
- **Love and friendship**
- **Making the most of college**

Avoiding unhelpful habits

It's too easy to slow yourself with drink or drugs, whereas you need to be giving yourself every chance possible in life: eating well, sleeping well, taking all-round good care.

Watching TV can give you the feeling that you're doing something, but you're actually doing a lot less than you imagine.

You've got to give yourself the best chance of succeeding by living properly. I was scared of going off the rails because it's so easy to do: with too much drink, or just being lazy about exercising and getting enough sleep, or even by starting a family too early.

We can only achieve quantum improvements in our lives if we attack the root cause of problems. Take the time to identify and understand the recurring failures of your character, so you are better able to fight them.

People get addicted to things for all sorts of reasons. It may be a symptom of unhappiness, a way of avoiding things, or an attempt to run away from the challenge of making a go of your life. People are addicts very often as a form of self-medication and we have to help them get to the bottom of their problem and face things head on rather than postpone things by getting out of their heads.

Let your most important, long-term desires and hopes squash the smaller, temporary hungers. Of course you want a drink; of course you want sex; of course you want to turn the TV on; of course you want to lie in bed. But in the long run, what do you want even more than those things?

To resist temptation, avoid it in the first place by steering clear of situations.

The best way to solve a problem is to find out as much about it as possible. Same goes for yourself and your worst habits. Keep a daily diary about how and when you do things, and in what sorts of situations with what results. This will be undeniable evidence for you to draw upon when you're designing changes.

When you have negative thoughts, replace them with three positive thoughts associated to the negative one. Within a few weeks you'll have it beaten.

Rather than allowing 'a knee-jerk reaction' to difficult situations or events, try to develop a 'response routine' that brings you long-term benefits as well as short-term ones. For instance, in the aftermath of some stressful circumstances, rather than going out and getting drunk, you should do your favourite form of exercise, then discuss the problem in detail with at least one other appropriate person, and then rehearse in your mind what you could do if that situation, or something like it, occurred again.

Know thin self: the more clearly you can see how your life is working, and the more realistic and honest you can be in describing it to yourself, the better position you will be in to improve things. For instance, you must be getting some kind of reward for regularly behaving in a negative. You have to work out what that reward is, and then you can pull the plug on it. This is best done by replacing it with some enjoyable activity that delivers even more positive outcomes for you.

Don't put yourself in temptation's way. Make plans to avoid them, because you can't make the decision once you're on your second pint.

If you've got 20 TV channels to graze, you're going to find something which absolutely fascinates you, but just remember that's someone else's life up there on the screen. What about *your* life?

Practice overcoming temptation in your mind How would you resist external pressures, like friends? What would you say and do to overcome their well-meant invitations that would only lure you off course?

If you have three or four days between having an alcoholic drink, then it's much harder to become addicted in any way.

One of the hardest things to accept is that your best friends can be positive and negative influences on you, because they simply may not appreciate just what is required to achieve the goals you have set for yourself.

Swap a negative activity for a positive one, but just make sure the new positive action serves fairly much the same purpose as the negative one did, and doesn't require any more time and trouble. Then it'll be a straight swap.

If you don't bother to fight the small battles, you certainly won't be able to fight the bigger ones in life, the really dangerous temptations. Develop your self-control and self-discipline with the smaller stuff and those lessons will serve you well with the bigger issues.

In the face of temptation, don't ask yourself "Do I want to" because the answer is probably 'yes'. Ask yourself "What do I want even *more*?"

If you enjoyed the above section, you might like to take a look at these:

- **Coping with crises, set-backs, mistakes & regrets.**
- **Your values & priorities**
- **Like yourself or change yourself**