

How to eat a plane

(re-booting SMART goal setting using a donkey)

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There's a rubbish joke about goals:

Question: How do you eat an elephant?

Answer: In little pieces. Not very funny I know, but it makes the main point in goal setting that big things are achieved in lots of small steps.

There are of course other goal setting sayings like: 'Count the pennies and the pounds look after themselves' and the Scottish raspberry picking version: 'Many a mickle makes a muckle. This is all helpful and relevant, but it's bit ploddy.

To rev things up a bit, rather than elephants, pennies and raspberries, I'd like to introduce you to Monsieur le Mangetout, literally Mr Eat it all. His claim to fame was that he ate a plane over several years by cutting it up in to tiny pieces that he consumed on a daily basis. It's a mad thing to do but obviously he had his reasons. Maybe he just wanted to be famous and that, you can imagine, explains a lot- this is a crucially important point that I'll come back to later.

I'm not suggesting that you should eat an elephant or a plane, but you might want to be: happier, fitter, thinner, wealthier, healthier, less stressed and in less pain. Goal setting is a way to help turn these dreams in to realities.

Goals are simply things we want to achieve. Goal setting is the process of identifying exactly what you want to achieve and finding a realistic way to do it. It is an important part of improving life in the face of limitations and as such is a central part of many pain management programmes.

Vague fizzles

Most people think about goals in vague ways. This often happens with new year resolutions when the whole nation thinks: 'must lose weight', 'must get fitter'

Often these ideas get acted on in a blur of enthusiasm for a few weeks and then it fizzles out. This year we've just had Veganuary, where people became temporary vegans. I imagine that for some people all the good intentions will collapse so that February becomes Mefebruary.

The way to make sure that goals become realities is to replace vague good intentions with structured exactness and that's where SMART comes in.

SMART

Most goal setting practice in health and business is based on the acronym SMART.

This is a very sensible approach, but a bit dull, with the letters standing for: *Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic* and *Time limited*. It's a way to achieve a goal by avoiding vagueness, being realistic and pinning yourself down. For example if someone wanted to lose weight the SMART approach would mean that they would need to identify:

- S** specifically how much they wanted to lose eg. one stone
- M** know how to measure success eg. weigh weekly
- A** do something that is achievable/doable eg. eat less bread
- R** do something that is practically and psychologically realistic ie. don't try to give up the impossible
- T** have a time by which the change will occur eg. six months, this also needs to be realistic

Hopefully you can see that this is much better than vague resolutions and over ambitious attempts to change your life in an instant. It's an approach that works well for some people in certain situations like dieting and rebuilding fitness using baselines. It's the approach that disciplined people are good at, but in my experience most people, like me, aren't particularly disciplined.

SMART is a good formula for the nuts and bolts of goal setting. If you don't succeed in achieving a goal, you can often understand why by looking at whether your goal was set up using SMART principles. However to really work SMART needs some extra items, or just one, the right motivation.

Motivation

At the beginning I said goals were things you want to achieve. But you have to really want to achieve them.

If you don't really want to do something, then eventually and inevitably you won't. Sometimes you might think you ought to do something, but that's not usually enough. You need to want to do it yourself. It needs to be right for you to overcome natural reluctance and inertia. In order to set up a goal correctly it's important to know what motivates you. In fact you need to know what sort of donkey you are.

Donkeys are famously stubborn and won't move until a carrot is offered to the front end or a stick is applied to the rear end. This is another way of saying that people are motivated either by carrots or sticks. Carrots are positive motivation – if I do this I'll get something good, whereas sticks represent negative motivation – if I don't do this I'll get something that is bad or worse.

Knowing whether you're a carrot or a stick donkey will help to establish the kind of motivation you need. However it's not either/or; some people are sticky about some things and carotty about others – but the important idea is that you know what works for you.

Sometimes motivation doesn't kick in (like an extra stubborn donkey) until something big happens that makes you think differently. If you have a cathartic moment it can quickly create a powerful motivational turning point that creates the oomph you need to achieve a goal. A catharsis can be a big flare up, a health scare or maybe just someone saying something that hits home. It's the kind of event that forces us to do a deal with ourselves. 'If I don't act now I'll regret it.' A big one in pain management is: No-one else can help so I might as well help myself

Going back to basics, you'll do something if you really really want to. The best example I can think of is how many brides lose weight to feel good on their wedding day. Clearly there is a huge motivation, to look good in front of friends and family. Or more powerfully, to not look bad! This brings us neatly to the next point, which is that you need other people to be involved.

Others

Getting other people involved is really helpful. Think about some dieting clubs, they work largely because they either support or shame people in to losing weight by the public weigh in. This works two ways – positively through friendship and support (carrot) and negatively through the fear of public shame (stick). I'm not suggesting that you lose weight, rather make sure that you share your goals, get support and most importantly get onboard with the biggest motivator in the world 'what others think'. Most of us will do something for someone else but we won't usually do it for ourselves. We might however do something that is good for our health because we don't want to let others down or will want their approval.

I use this in my group work when I ask people to do something at home and tell me how they got on next time. They usually don't want to do it at home, but they do want to tell me how they got on and this works even better if they know the rest of the group will be listening.

Visualise

This is the fun bit. We follow what we visualise. A good golfer (not me) imagines the perfect shot and then 'makes it'. When I play golf I imagine how the shot is bound to go the wrong way and hey presto, it does. Something similar happens in life. The person who always imagines the worst will struggle. Imagining that you are bound to fail in achieving your goal means that you often achieve what you imagine!

We need to visualise where we want to go so that we can get there. This is important because people usually have a negative image of themselves and where they're going. There are many ways to visualise success. The simple version is to talk it through with someone. What would it be like, what would be different, how would you be behaving, what would you look like? What sorts of things would you be saying?

Or you could do this when you're relaxed alone so that your imagination and unconscious can work better. So just for now dare to imagine yourself in the future having achieved something positive that is important to you now. See yourself at a specific time

in the future. What is the future you doing? What are you saying? What are people saying to you? What does it feel like? What has changed in your life? And keep doing this regularly. In this process you can also ask future you: How did I get here? What did I do? What do I need to do now? In this way you're doing something like the good golfer-visualising success so that you move towards it. This won't suit everyone, but if it suits you it will really help.

Can vs Can't ... make it easy, or just not too hard

It's easy to destroy a possible goal by thinking about everything you can't do and thereby zapping any chance you have of finding something you can do. The point of goal setting is to achieve the goal largely through being realistic. It's unrealistic or at best unhelpful to try to do what you can't do- so don't bother. It is much better to focus on what you can do and do it no matter how small it is. Eventually if you keep doing what you can do, bit-by-bit you'll move closer to doing what you thought you couldn't do. This means achieving what seems impossible by doing what is possible. My way of thinking about this is an onion with its many layers. The key is to move from layer to layer focussing on what you can do rather than on what you can't.

The whole point of a goal is to score it. So make sure it is small enough to be achievable. It doesn't matter at all how small the step is, the point is to be able to make it. If you do what you can do and keep doing it, no matter how small, it creates a cycle of success and motivation. And if it's all getting too hard, just reduce the size of the step. For example our dieter might be struggling to cut out 1 slice of toast, so maybe cut out half a slice for now, or if it's too hard, cut out something different.

Bench marking yourself

In industry they have fancy terms for simple things. Bench marking good practice basically means finding out what other companies do well and copying them. This is something you need to do to yourself. Companies copy each other, you just need to copy yourself.

Undoubtedly you will have achieved something difficult in the past. How you did that will give clues about how to achieve something new now. It will also tell you that you are capable of doing something difficult and how you were motivated.

The nuclear donkey

I've talked a lot about carrots and sticks. But some people just aren't for shifting.

Ultimately some people will never change. Or rather will never change because of the way things are set up for them right now.

There is an idea in therapy that people make the best choices they can at the time.

So if they don't make the 'right' health promoting choice, then that's their choice.

In order for a different choice to be made, something needs to shift. Either they need to know something new or have a different experience. Put simply they need to see things differently.

When faced with resistance my nuclear option is to hand responsibility back by saying 'it's your choice'. This is remarkable because it takes away the opposition they have been pushing against and they are left having to take responsibility for their own situation – in my experience this can work wonders.

Planes again

If you really want to eat an aeroplane (please don't) here's how to do it:

- **Make sure you can actually do it, apparently Michel Lotito (Monsieur Le Mange Tout) had an especially thick lining to his stomach**
- **Be motivated enough to do it – he made a career from it, appeared on TV and enjoyed fame especially in plane eating circles**
- **Chop it up in to realistically small bits**
- **Eat it daily (he eat 2lbs of metal every day)**
- **Tell your friends so you're buoyed by support and tell the press to create public pressure – imagine the shame if you fail**
- **Visualise the fame you'll gain**
- **Keep chomping**

During his time Monsieur le Mange Tout chomped his way through two beds, seven TVs, six chandeliers, 18 bicycles and a Cessna 150.

Most goal setting is more mundane since we don't regularly eat planes, especially on pain management courses, but the principle of finding the right motivation is universally crucial. Everything else is detail.