

SMART Goals For The New Year

Taking care of yourself when you have diabetes is more than taking medications and going for medical appointments. It usually involves making lifestyle changes which can be overwhelming and often require a considerable amount of effort. Henry Lew, psychologist, shows you how to set goals you can reach as you usher in the new year.

"After a while I just found it hard to track what food to eat, what not to eat, and when it rains or I feel slightly tired I just end up doing other housework and I forgot to go for my morning walks," said Madam Jannifa.

Sounds familiar? If you've been in Madam Jannifa's shoes, you know you will soon be sliding down the slippery slope to complacency and your diabetes will be spinning out of control.

Like many diabetes patients, you begin with the honourable intention to make lifestyle changes but when you face a chain of challenges, you lose your motivation along the way. Eventually, you just stop trying and give up. The main reason for many disappointing outcomes is often due to a lack of planning and goal setting.

"What's there to plan?" asked Mr Foo. "I just need to take my medication and follow what the doctor, nurses and dietitian tell me what to eat and what not to eat." Or so he thinks.

"It's actually very simple to exercise. It's all in my mind," said Madam Zaafira.

Like Mr Foo and Mdm Zaafira, you might have also felt that it is unnecessary to plan and you can do it on your own. Taking responsibility and ownership of the lifestyle changes is the very foundation of self-management in diabetes. However, as the famous proverb goes, "he who fails to plans, plans to fail." Honestly, how many times have you said, "I am going to exercise" but ended up doing something else like watching TV or reading a book? How many times have

you tried to eat healthy for a few days but ended up returning to your old diet of greasy foods?

Properly set goals help us to specify “what”, “how” and “when” we want to make behavioural health changes regarding exercise and diet. In specifying our goals, we have a list of “steps” to follow through. It is similar to having the ease of a user’s manual when we first purchase an electronic equipment instead of trying to figure out what to do on our own.

Goals are also like signposts along the road. They provide us with a direction so that we can concentrate our efforts in the right area and achieve the lifestyle changes we want to make. In addition, properly set goals also help us to monitor if we are on track.

Goal Setting Tips

Below are some tips to help you set goals in a productive manner so that you would be more likely to carry it through. If you are in the process of making New Year Resolutions for 2011, perhaps improving your health is on your list. Why not try the following out to help yourself make further behavioural changes for your diabetes?

1. First, ask yourself “What do you want to accomplish?”
2. How Important is it for you to accomplish this? On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not important for you to accomplish this aim, and 10 being very important for you to accomplish this, what number would you give as the importance level to accomplish this task?
3. How Confident are you to accomplish this? On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being not confident at all to accomplish this aim, and 10 being very confident to accomplish this, what number would you give as your confidence level to accomplish this task?
4. If your ratings to both questions 2 and 3 are higher than 5, you may proceed to the question 7 as this means that your goal setting and behavioural changes are less likely to be affected by your level of confidence and motivation.
5. If your rating is lower than 5 for question 2 (that is, your importance level is rated below 5), get the facts from a healthcare professional who can explain them clearly to you. Initially, Mr Foo did as he was told but he did not really understand the reasons and was not fully convinced why he needed to make those changes. After a nurse explained that diabetes is not just about taking medication, he became more motivated to make dietary changes and even participated in physical activities.
6. If your rating is lower than 5 for question 3 (that is, the confidence level is rated below 5), getting professional help might be a good start. Madam Jannifa wanted to watch her diet but she had little confidence about succeeding. After speaking to a dietitian, she picked up tips on how to make changes to her diet rather than rely on what she had heard from friends and relatives. This helped to boost her confidence and make her change in her diet easier to achieve.
7. Are your goals SPECIFIC? Do they detail the ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘with whom’, where relevant. For example, “I will watch my diet” is a vague goal. “I will eat only half a bowl of rice during lunch on weekdays” is considered a specific goal that sets the time, day and action to be taken. This provides specific steps to guide our behaviour.
8. Are your goals MEASURABLE? In other words, can your goals be measured in numbers? “I want to lose weight” is not a measurable goal. How would you know if you have lost weight? “I want to lose 3kg within 4 months”. This is a measurable goal; it tells us how much weight we want to lose and by when. Measurable goals provide a reference to see if we are on track.
9. Are your goals ACHIEVABLE and REALISTIC? Are you being overly ambitious in your goals that you might just push yourself too fast and far? Do your circumstances allow you to carry out your goals in a practical way or are you setting yourself up for disappointment? “I want to exercise every day for 45 minutes starting tomorrow” is a specific and measurable goal, no doubt. But to someone who has not exercised at all or who has stopped exercising for a long time, it will be unrealistic to expect him to do so. Perhaps it might be more realistic for such an individual to first consult his doctor and start off at a slower pace and then build up from there.
10. Are your goals TIMELY? This means that if there is a timeframe involved, you need to decide how often you are going to do it, how long for each time, and length of period from when to when.

SPECIFIC, MEASURABLE, ACHIEVABLE, REALISTIC, TIMELY goals. Notice the first letters of each word form the acronym SMART. Start the year ahead with SMART goals and take the great leap forward in improving your behavioural health!