

A Small Steps Guide to Goal Setting and Time Management

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Chapter 1: Small Steps to Goal Setting

Small steps in a nutshell

You can take a task, however daunting, and break it down into smaller and smaller steps until it becomes manageable. You can do small things in your everyday life to allow you to achieve what you want to.

About this chapter

This chapter introduces the small steps method. I start by telling you more about how this book works. Then I'll ask you to begin to think about yourself and your aspirations and show you the ten small steps principles. The rest of the chapter includes the basics of keeping a journal, and a definition of what a goal *is* and what a goal *isn't*. It finishes with a brief introduction to Abraham Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* and some practical exercises for you to try.

Small steps to goal setting: an introduction

About this book.

This book is designed to do four things:

- You'll be introduced to the small steps method.
- You'll learn how to set personal, value-led goals.
- You'll learn the principles of time management.
- You're given a list of resources, as well as access to the Small Steps Method website, to help you take things further.

The book is divided into two halves: goal-setting and time management. This introduction gives you the basic overview of the small steps method. Both sections of the book elaborate on it. The advice in the first section is designed to fit any kind of goal-setting,

whether it relates to a personal ambition, your career, a charity or business, or a group of people with a shared dream.

Discovering your goals: An overview of you.

First I'd like to invite you to do an overview of you. Right now, whatever you are doing with your life, what's good about being you? Take a moment to appreciate yourself. What are your dreams and ambitions and your hopes for the future? Is there anything you'd like to change? Are there any skills you'd like to develop?

The small steps method

The small steps method is about taking a task – any task – and breaking it down into small steps. It doesn't matter what that task is, the same principles apply. Here are the small step principles, in a nutshell, followed by an example. This is the first time I've articulated them, especially for this book. The rest of the book is dedicated to showing you how to apply the small steps method to goal setting and time management.

1. Small steps are small. Break down a task until you get to something you could easily achieve today.
2. Small steps are specific and concrete. Make the small steps as down-to-earth and measurable as possible, if it suits you.
3. Small steps don't cost a fortune. Do as many free steps as possible first. Financing a project can also be broken down into small steps.
4. Small steps are just like footsteps: Take one small step and take another small step after it. Keep taking small steps.
5. Small steps are just small steps. They don't rely on luck, on other people, or on results.

6. Small steps don't necessarily go in a straight line. One action doesn't have to lead directly to the next, as long as they all relate back to the task.
7. Take lots of small steps, especially at the beginning.
8. Turn up. Small steps require you to get off the sofa.
9. Once you've prepared, you can do small steps without even thinking about it.
10. Small steps deserve to be appreciated. Pause at regular intervals to acknowledge your progress and to keep in check. Keep some kind of record in a notebook or journal, on a computer or on your blog.

What you need to do to understand and follow the small steps method:

Throughout this book, I suggest that you do some exercises. This is a common theme of the small steps method – small practical exercises that:

- Help you to be more aware of your life, your values and your goals.
- Help you to practice a technique or idea.

Do the exercises in a notebook or on your computer or hand-held device. This will form a record of your progress. The exercises are all optional. In fact, they won't all be relevant or attractive to you. Pick those you're interested in. Leave the others. I suggest that you do these exercises in a notebook (paper or digital) *so that you can collect them in one place and look back over them*. You might want separate notebooks for some of the other suggestions, like the bugs diary (in chapter twelve) or the food diary (in chapter thirteen), if you choose to do them. The notebooks are specifically for jotting down the results of the exercises in this book. Often I ask you to carry one around, so you may want to buy a portable one! By the way, some of the exercises are repeated, getting more advanced or

more detailed each time. This is deliberate: so that you're introduced to a concept first and then given time to work on it.

Keeping a journal

What is a journal?

You may find it helpful to keep a journal while you are working towards particular goals. This particularly relates to small steps principle number 10. A journal is a place to record a commentary on the process. It's also a place to record your thoughts and feelings, dreams and ideas. You can use it like a scrapbook too. Where an exercise asks you to think about your thoughts and feelings about a particular issue, you could include this in your journal. Again, this is optional. You might feel that the more straightforward notebook is enough for you, although there are various reasons to keep a journal:

- Record it. Some people like to have a record of their progress in one particular goal or project. This kind of journal focuses on challenges and set backs, successes and unexpected pleasures resulting from the journey you've decided to undertake. For example, in chapter twelve I ask you to imagine a fictional person called Martin who wants to build his own house. He might want to record his progress like this.
- Practical ideas and suggestions. For his kind of project, Martin might need a place to set down practical details as he goes forward.
- Inspiration. You can also use a journal for inspirational images, words and snippets of text to help you to visualise where you want to go.
- Get it out. You can use a journal for self-expression - to vent in whatever way you want to.

Using your journal to complete your plan.

Chapter three includes a number of goal setting activities. Once you've worked through them you'll have a complete list of the

goals you want to achieve. If you decide to use a journal, you can include a goal plan at the beginning.

Who writes about journaling?

If you're interested in journaling and want to take it further, you might find the following writers useful.

- Julia Cameron suggests keeping Morning Pages in the bestselling *The Artist's Way* and *The Sound of Paper*. You can also find out more on her website. Have a look at the resources section.
- Therapeutic writing. It's beyond the scope of this book but you can find lots of information on journaling in books on therapeutic writing. There are some suggestions in the resources section.

What is a goal?

Defining 'a goal'

Before you start setting goals, it's useful to figure out exactly what a goal is:

- concrete and specific (or at least can be turned this way). You will never know if a goal is achievable - or *even something you actually want to do* – unless you make it concrete and specific. Concrete means you'll know if you've achieved it. It's something you could actually do in real terms. Specific means getting down to the nitty-gritty of what you would have to do to achieve the goal. It's not general or vague. If you find yourself feeling a little suspicious or cynical about specific and measurable goals, have a look at chapter seven now: I review Stephen M. Shapiro's 'goal-free' approach there.
- something you want to achieve. It's odd when you think about it but a lot of us go round with (usually rather vague and non-specific) goals that come from what other people expect of us, or that we have heard somewhere are good ideas. Let go of it if you don't really want to do it.

- a goal is attached to a reason (even if it's 'because I fancy it'). One danger with goal setting is that we make up goals to do with something we're not really interested in, just because it's become a habit. A goal has a reason attached to it – you know why you want to do it.
- a goal is often time-limited (or at least can be turned this way). Many writers on goal-setting agree that we need to be able to tell whether we've achieved a goal or not by using a timeframe. This is scary because it means committing to do something by a particular date, which is why many of our goals remain unformed in our heads and we never let go of those we don't really want to do. However, not all goal-setting gurus agree: for other approaches to goal setting, have a look at chapter seven.
- a goal is achievable (but it can be a challenge). This seems obvious at first sight but it's the chief paradox of goal-setting advice. Many writers tell us to dream big or even to dream the impossible. Some even seem to tell us that we don't need to take any action – just thinking about it enough will make it happen. A goal needs to be challenging *and* achievable.

And now, just to make sure, let's look at what a goal *isn't*:

- What you think you *should* do. A goal isn't guilt-laden; a goal is about what you *want* to achieve: sometimes a subtle difference, sometimes a huge one.
- What other people think you *should* do: it's impossible to dispel other people's expectations entirely – especially when they are close friends or relatives – but your heart will never be in it if you follow society's agenda or your parent's or next door neighbour's. Make sure they are *your* goals.

- What you *could* do: perhaps you *could* train to cross the Sahara Desert, win a pie eating contest, hike in the Andes – but do you want to? Idiomatic goals (used in the media as short-hand for high achievement) like writing a novel, running a marathon, swimming the Amazon and climbing Kilimanjaro can catch us out – it’s ok if you don’t.
- Inflexible or set in stone: a myth put about in some goal-setting self-help books is that we must do anything and everything to strive towards our goals. Not true! They might change. You might change.
- A promise or a guilt trip. You can change your mind; if you don’t achieve your goal you’ve learnt something along the way.

Do you need a goal?

Bear in mind the results of the following exercise when considering whether you need to set a goal or goals in a part of your life:

1. Spend some time making a list of the skills you have – not only those you are paid for. Now make a list of skills you would like to improve. Refer back to this list as you work through the rest of this chapter. We’ll return to this list again in chapter six.
2. Write these headings in your notebook: health, career, study, family, finances, travel, leisure, social. Do any of these stand out as particularly significant?

Aspirations and dreams v. what I need right now.

There are two kinds of goals. Seemingly impossible dreams on the one hand and the perhaps more mundane or everyday things I need to change right now. Aspirations and dreams are expressed as if they are way off in the future whereas ‘things I need now’ goals seem so immediate they can be overwhelming. You’ll probably have *both* kinds of goals.

Shared goals.

Many goals are not individual ones. You may have the same goals as work colleagues or your life partner. Equally your goals might conflict. Even when a goal is an individual one it will still have an impact on others. Make an effort to understand any shared or conflicting goals. Do your research so you know what you're talking about.

Overlapping goals.

Goals generate other goals. Some goals automatically generate *overlapping* goals: goals I need to achieve at the same time. For example: 'I want to start a family' not only has an impact on others, it brings financial goals with it, which might generate career goals: perhaps 'I want a steady job' or 'I want to work freelance.' It also generates overlapping health goals. For example: 'I'm going to give up alcohol.'

Overlapping and overwhelming?

Overlapping goals can feel overwhelming. Deal with them by breaking each one down into small steps. Then take small steps towards each goal every week. I recently found the notebook where we planned small steps towards achieving our goal of having a family. Seeing it brought back all those overwhelming feelings about the prospect of going through IVF, the cost, emotional and financial, the thought of having to lose weight and get fit, the idea of having to inject myself! The *only way* I could do it was by breaking it down into manageable steps. Then I looked at my son and realised we'd done it! It didn't matter about those difficult feelings – we did it anyway. You know what? Even if it hadn't worked I would still be glad that I had tried. By the way, I also discovered we had written 'Build our own house' - something we haven't done yet – and it generated those same overwhelming feelings about cost, difficulty and expectations.

Separate goals.

Once you break down a goal into steps, it might generate completely separate goals: goals I need to achieve first. For example, if you needed to do another qualification before enrolling on a college course or if you needed to boost your confidence

before applying for a volunteer position. Separate goals are easier than overlapping goals because you can manage them one at a time, but they can be frustrating because you can feel as though they are holding you back.

When you realise you have a set of separate goals, it helps to work out a medium-term timeframe for yourself: *I will have achieved my goal in X number of years*. Doing so also allows you to note any time constraints. Time constraints can turn separate goals into overlapping goals.

Your hierarchy of needs

In the 1940s, psychologist Abraham Maslow expressed all the things human beings need as a hierarchy, called the *hierarchy of needs*. It's usually drawn as a pyramid, and has five levels. At the bottom are physiological or biological needs, followed by safety, love / belonging and esteem, with self-actualisation at the top. Maslow argued that each level of need must be satisfied before those above it, and so on, up the hierarchy. Without fulfilling our basic needs – having enough food to eat or a safe place to live - we can't look after our 'higher' needs that might include achieving our goals. Another way of putting this is that we all have physical, psychological / emotional, social, cultural and spiritual needs. To neglect one kind of need will impact on the other.

Food chain

For example, food is a physiological need – on the bottom rung of Maslow's *Hierarchy*. Do you eat breakfast? Do you keep your blood sugar level balanced? Do you eat enough fruit and veg? All of these things affect our mental health and our physical health, and therefore have an impact on how we manage our daily routine. Long term they create a chain reaction and have an impact on whether we achieve our goals or whether achieving our goals makes us happy. Following Maslow's idea of a hierarchy, it would be foolish to neglect healthy eating because we're chasing a deadline or under pressure in another area of our lives. I'm talking to myself as much as to anyone else here but if you think about it,

it also doesn't make sense to argue that we *don't have enough time* to eat healthily.

Initial exercises

The many parts of your life.

Take a moment now to stop and think about the many parts of your life. It helps to begin thinking this way because it's a theme that we'll return to later. Is there anything you'd like to add? Any life part that's missing? We'll come back to this at the beginning of chapter three.

Things I must do before I'm / Things I've always wanted to do but...

At the back of most of our minds is the idea that we'll do X before we reach a certain age or before we get married or before we have children. Most of us also have a vague idea of things we've always wanted to do and a 'but' stopping us from doing them. Taking time to write them down begins to make them concrete so we can either let them go, or take action. Make a note of yours.

Small steps practice

Try the following three-part exercise:

1. Flowchart. In your notebook, create the boxes for a flowchart. Now chart the steps you need to drink a glass of water. Be as specific as possible.
2. Picture. This time *draw* the steps you need to take to drink a glass of water.
3. Write it. Now *write down* the small steps.

Small ways to keep check

If you do the practical exercises step-by-step as you work through this book you'll automatically be keeping a check on your progress. Here are some other ways to keep on top:

- A Grateful List. Stop for a moment, whenever you can, and make a list of things you are grateful for right now. This is a real mood lifter and helps to put our goals in perspective.