

# Module 1: Get Prepared to Grow

## Introduction

The journey toward becoming your best self requires intentionality and planning. Just like any other kind of trip you might take, it's helpful to prepare before you set out. In this chapter, we will discuss some helpful preparation stages that will facilitate your growth.

Creating quality plans is a critical piece of growing and sustaining a growth mindset. Sometimes when we fail to reach goals, we use that failure as evidence to support the foundational belief of a fixed mindset – that we are not capable of change. However, the much more likely reality is that we failed because we weren't using effective goal-setting strategies. Understanding the best methods for setting and working toward long-term goals will give us a better chance at realizing our goals and ultimately proving to ourselves that we are capable of anything.

## Get Clear on Your Long-Term Goals

*“The clearer you are when visualizing your dreams, the brighter the spotlight will be to lead you on the right path.” – Gail Lynn Goodwin*

One of the first steps toward realizing a goal is to be able to clearly define it. Often, our life goals take the form of vague wishes. For example, we might desire to be happier, smarter, or more confident, but when we look closely at goals like these, it isn't clear what we actually mean. What would it look like to be happier? Happier than what? How would we know when we've reached our desired amount of happiness?

Research suggests that the likelihood we will achieve a goal is greatly influenced by how precisely we are able to explicate it (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2010). This doesn't mean that we can't strive to be happier or more confident, rather, we just need to be more specific about what we mean by that. In the example of happiness, we would first need to identify the areas in which we are unsatisfied with our current level of happiness or the factors that contribute to an experience of generalized unhappiness. For instance, perhaps we are dissatisfied with our job and it's this stress and dissatisfaction that is impeding our ability to enjoy our life. In this case, we might redefine our happiness goal as finding work that is meaningful and enjoyable (at least most of the time).

As we are exploring the details of our ambitions and identifying quality goals to set, it is critical to also consider how challenging and personally relevant our specified goal is. It has long been observed that we are much more likely to reach goals that are meaningful and have the right amount of challenge (Hall & Foster, 1977). When the goals we are striving toward aren't important to us, are too easy, or exceed our current ability too greatly, we can find it nearly impossible to find the energy required to pursue them and we likely would burn out or give up before reaching them.

## Exercise: Defining Your Dreams

Think of your biggest or most important long-term goals and write them down. Start with at least one but no more than 3. You can always repeat this exercise with different goals later on, but it's helpful to start simple and then build from there. Once you've identified your goals, move through them one at a time and ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I identify specific steps I would need to take to achieve this goal?
- Is this goal realistic?
- Is this goal challenging?
- Can I measure my progress toward this goal?
- Will it be possible to know when I've reached this goal?
- Does this goal matter to me?
- Do I feel inspired by this goal?

If you answered 'no' to any of these questions, take a minute to reflect on the goal and consider how you might reframe your specified goal so that it satisfies all the important criteria. If the goal you've selected isn't meaningful to you or doesn't make you feel inspired, it might be necessary to select a different one. Accomplishing a challenging goal in which you don't feel truly invested is nearly impossible and might not be worth the energy it would take to reach it.

Once you're able to move through your list of goals and answer 'yes' to all of the above questions, write out the revised version of your goals.

## Know Your Whys

*"Efforts and courage are not enough without purpose and direction." – John F. Kennedy*

Your "whys" are the driving factors behind your goals, the intentions that inspire you to action. Exploration of your intentions is an important step in preparing for growth, even in instances when the 'why' feels obvious. For example, let's say your goal is to be debt free. It might seem silly to examine the why behind an objective like this. Of course, we would want to be rid of our debt. Who wouldn't? However, there are deeper motivations behind the desire to be debt-free, reasons *why* it is important to us that we don't have debt. Maybe our why is to relieve our stress,

to be able to save for retirement, or to start preparing to have a family. Recognizing these deeper motivations and intentions is instrumental for the change we hope to make.

Research has shown that intentions help shape our behavior (Webb & Sheeran, 2006). In fact, studies suggest that the stronger the intention, the more likely you will be to successfully change your behavior (Ajzen, 2020). The strengths of your intentions are shaped by your mindset. A fixed mindset in which you feel that you are not capable of achieving your goal will result in weak intentions and a lower probability of success. A growth mindset in which you feel that you are not capable *yet*, but you will be with sufficient effort, results in stronger intentions and increases the likelihood that you will achieve your goal.

When defining the motivations behind your goals, there are a few important tips discovered by behavioral scientists that will help you set strong and effective intentions:

### Promotion > Prevention

Frame your goals in terms of *promoting* positive behavior instead of *preventing* negative outcomes. For example, you are more likely to reach your goal if your motivation is “I want to be successful at...” than you are if your motivation is “I don’t want to fail at...”

### Acquisition of Competence > Demonstration of Competence

Being motivated to demonstrate that you are competent or skilled in some area is less effective than being motivated to acquire competence (e.g., “I want to win a jiu-jitsu competition” is better than “I want my friends to see how good I am at jiu-jitsu”). This is another area where a growth mindset is critical. If you have a fixed mindset in which you believe you’re as good as you’re ever going to be, it is impossible to set a goal focused on improving.

### Internal Reward > External Reward

Motivations that center on how achieving the goal will make you feel are more powerful than motivations that center on how achieving the goal will make you look or what you will gain. For example, if your goal is to get your degree, you are more likely to succeed if you’re motivated by how good it feels to learn than if you’re motivated by having an impressive diploma or a higher earning potential.

### Exercise: Discovering Why

Using your list of clearly defined long-term goals you wrote out earlier, complete the following sentence: I want to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

Try to be as specific as possible about the intentions behind your goals and remember to avoid whys that focus on the prevention of a negative outcome, demonstration of competence, and external rewards.

## Map Out Short-Term Goals That Lead to Your Long-Term Goals

*“You have to believe in the long term plan you have but you need the short term goals to motivate and inspire you.” – Roger Federer*

Most goals are comprised of many incremental steps. For example, if your goal is to be a great athlete, you might work toward this goal by setting smaller sub-goals or proximal goals like improving your exercise habit, eating more nutrient-rich foods to support your body as it heals from training, and picking milestones by which you can track your progress.

Research has shown that structuring a goal into a set of subgoals reduces the difficulty of the pursuit, enhances your perception of how attainable your goal is, and provides positive reinforcement which facilitates continued motivation and persistence (Latham & Seijts, 1999). In other words, setting and realizing proximal goals can facilitate a growth mindset in which you believe that you’re capable of shaping your life as you want it. In addition to supporting this sense of self-efficacy, setting proximal goals is essential for successful goal pursuit for many other reasons, including the following:

- Setting proximal goals helps reduce feelings of overwhelm when it comes to accomplishing the goal.
- Proximal goals provide you with a place to start. One of the most common barriers to achieving lasting change is getting started.
- Achieving proximal goals can provide clear markers of progress toward the overarching goal. Failing to achieve a proximal goal can also help you determine when you need to change your strategy.
- Proximal goals reduce the risk of damage to your self-concept which can come up when you compare where you are now with where you want to be.

Decades of research suggest that quality sub-goals have the following 5 features:

1. **Specificity** – Your goal is clearly defined. As mentioned earlier, successfully realizing your goals requires that you know what you are striving for.
2. **Measurability** – It is possible to track your progress toward and completion of the goal quantitatively. Without the ability to measure progress in some fashion, it is easier to become overwhelmed or discouraged and decide to abandon your goal.
3. **Attainability** – Your goal is something that is achievable within the context of your life. For example, setting a goal of learning a new language would require effort and dedication, but is certainly attainable over time. Setting a goal of learning 10 new

languages, on the other hand, is significantly less attainable (especially if you plan to do literally anything else with your time). Determining whether or not a goal is attainable can be tricky for anyone who doesn't already have a growth-oriented mindset because, if you believe that your capabilities are fixed, it's easy to decide that you are not capable of attaining a goal that is fully within reach.

4. **Relevance** – The proximal goal is an instrumental step in achieving the larger goal. Working toward a proximal goal should matter in the long run, otherwise, it will cost you time and energy without much reward.
5. **Time limits** – Your goal includes an 'achieve by' date. Setting a time limit on proximal goals is a highly effective way to increase motivation and commitment and to keep track of progress toward your larger goal.