

Strategy: Set priorities and goals for your life and regularly review and rank them in order of importance to you.

One way to maintain a sense of control over your life and mental health is to know where you want to go in life and how you plan to get there. In other words, *planning* is important. Unfortunately though, the plans of many are limited to making New Year's resolutions — resolutions that often fall by the wayside within a few months. Why?

For one thing, we all have responsibilities and roles which occupy much of our time and energy. It is easy to get into a pattern of simply trying to do what needs to be done each day. That can leave us with little time for anything else. But, if we don't put careful thought into our broader goals for life and how to reach them, it's possible to get to a point later in life when we realize we haven't achieved the things we really want. Therefore, a more focused, mindful approach to identifying life priorities and goals can be really helpful in helping us to reach our goals.

Planning 101

Organizations often use a process called "strategic planning" to define future directions and determine goals and courses of action that will take them where they want to go. The principles of strategic planning can also be applied to individuals.

Begin by visualizing what you want to achieve in life or what you want your life to look like 10 or 20 years from now. This, in fact, is one of the successful life strategies identified by psychologist and author, Stephen R. Covey in his bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. He refers to this process as "beginning with the end in mind." "If you don't make a conscious effort to visualize who you are and what you want in life, then you empower other people and circumstances to shape you and your life by default," says Dr. Covey.

You can create your life vision in a general way, or, in specific life areas such as family, finances, career, travel, leisure, or hobbies. Creating your vision gives you a big picture view of the directions you want your life to take.

Assessing Your Here and Now

Another component of setting life priorities involves taking a look at what you value and don't value about your life right now. Ask yourself the following two questions:

What is good about my life right now that I want to preserve and nurture?

Example: I'm very happy with my marriage and want to keep it successful.

What would I like to spend less time and energy on?

Example: I'd like to get more help with housework so I will have more time and energy for art.

Prioritize

Look at your vision, and then decide what is most important to you. It may be that some parts of your vision have almost been achieved, while others may need to wait until later in life. Some may require more planning and attention than others in the short term.

Set Goals

The next step is to turn your priorities into goals. Goal-setting begins the process of breaking your vision down into concrete steps. Setting goals also helps us focus our efforts. Some research has shown that goal-setting also helps people to structure their work patterns and avoid becoming distracted when working on specific tasks (Strickland).

Some of your goals may relate to short term priorities; for example, spending more time with an aging parent. Other goals might have to do with career development, a career change, world travel, losing weight or improving your physical condition.

Regardless of what you want to achieve, goals need to be concrete and realistic. For example, the goal, “Become rich and famous,” is probably not specific enough (nor is it achievable for many people). A more specific goal would be, “Within a year, I will identify ways to save money, increase my income and develop a plan for investments.” These goals set the stage for planning shorter-term objectives, such as revisiting your family budget, finding an investment counsellor or pursuing education/ training that will increase your earning potential.

Break Goals into Steps

Next, determine the steps that will help you reach your goals.

Let’s say you want to establish a new and potentially more lucrative career in real estate. Some initial steps might be as follows:

1. Meet with a real estate agent I know and ask him/her about what steps I need to take to develop a career in real estate.
2. Sign up for a real estate education program.
3. Save money to pay for training.
4. After getting my real estate license, shift my retail sales job to part-time and gradually shift to full-time real estate within two years.

Other visions will require different kinds of goals and steps. For example, if one of your priorities is to start playing the piano again, you might include taking a lesson once a week and practicing daily as your goals. You may also need to think about the activities or responsibilities you’ll spend less time on, in order to make time for piano practice.

Assessing Your Assets and Challenges

Setting realistic goals also requires careful assessment of the strengths, skills and challenges that will affect your ability to reach them. Ask yourself:

What challenges or roadblocks must I overcome in order to reach my goals?

Example: I’d like to be a good public speaker, but I am very shy in groups.

What strengths do you have that will help you achieve your goals?

Example: My good basic writing skills and vast knowledge of children's literature are assets that can help me achieve my goal of becoming a children's author.

Review Your Priorities

Once you've created your vision and goals, write them down somewhere in a diary, notebook or computer file and look at them at least once a year. As time goes on, people change and grow, and their interests and opportunities may change, so life priorities and visions can change as well. Reviewing them will help you see the progress you are making and give you a chance to assess the priorities that require more (or less) attention and the ones that may no longer seem relevant. Reviewing your original priorities regularly may also help you to identify new ones.

One strategy that might help you remember to do this is to use the annual media coverage of New Year's resolutions as a reminder to review life priorities each year. You might not feel the need to review your priorities every single year, but the beginning of a new year is as good a time as any to give them some thought. Find a system that works best for you.

Setting priorities and goals for life only works as well as the thought and effort we put into it. But, the effort is worthwhile. Not only can mindful life planning help us get to where we want to go, it also helps us uncover new priorities, goals and interests along the way.

Resources:

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Powerful Lessons in Personal Change; Covey S., Simon and Schuster, 1989.

Personal Goal Setting. Find Direction. Live Your Life Your Way.
<http://www.mindtools.com/page6.html>

References:

Covey, S.: <https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits-habit2.php>

Strickland, O; Galimba, M. "Managing Time: The Effects of Personal Goal Setting on Resource Allocation Strategy and Task Performance," *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 2001.