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## How to Set Realistic Fitness Goals You'll Actually Achieve, According to Top Trainers

Fitness goals are important on several counts. They hold us accountable, expand our definition of possible, and encourage us to push through temporary discomfort for longer-lasting change. But figuring out how to set fitness goals you'll actually want to attain can be part art, part science.

Mark DiSalvo, NYC-based certified strength and conditioning specialist, explains it this way: A good fitness goal can be "your North Star when you have bad days," he tells SELF. In other words, a goal, if thoughtful and well structured, can give you the extra incentive to keep going when motivation wanes, or when life otherwise gets in the way.

The problem is that it's easy to set goals that are too lofty, unsustainable, and otherwise unrealistic. We then fail to achieve them and feel worse about ourselves than before we started. This year, to avoid that detrimental downward spiral altogether, we asked DiSalvo and four other top trainers to share their advice for doing fitness goal setting right. Here, 11 of their tips for enacting real, positive change.



### 1. Focus on one goal at a time.

When it comes to setting a fitness goal, "one of the biggest mistakes is that people try to do too much at one time," Kellen Scantlebury, D.P.T., certified strength and conditioning specialist and founder of Fit Club NY, tells SELF. Perhaps you want to hit the gym every day, cut out added sugar, and get at least eight hours of sleep a night. Trying to tackle that much at once is essentially just setting yourself up for failure. With so many things to achieve, "people get anxious, and if they didn't do one thing, they feel like a failure," says Scantlebury. This can lead to negative self-talk that lowers your chances of achieving any of the goals.

Instead, pick one thing you want to crush—like, doing a pull-up, or completing your first-ever 5K—and channel your efforts into achieving that before exploring another goal.

### 2. Make it your own.

It can be easy to scroll through the 'gram and feel inspired-yet-envious by images of the super fit. Yet basing your own goals off of what you see others achieving is neither productive nor practical.

"When we are bombarded by images of what fitness should look like and how we should do XYZ, it can be hard to

identify what's good for you," Tony Vidal, NYC-based certified strength and conditioning specialist and master trainer with fitness app POPiN, tells SELF. Certain things that top athletes can do—run a marathon, do 100 push-ups, master the most challenging yoga poses—"may be great for them, but it's not metric that everyone should be measured by," says Vidal. In other words, your goal should be your goal—something that you personally are excited about and realistically able to achieve—not someone else's.

### **3. Make it measurable, specific, and time-bound.**

Having a measurable goal allows you to track your progress, says Vidal, and the more specific your goal, the clearer the path to achieving it becomes, adds DiSalvo.

Wanting to "be stronger," for example, is a great place to start, but what does that mean to you? Saying you want to increase the number of push-ups you can do makes the goal measurable, and saying you want to be able to do 20 push-ups in one minute makes it specific. On top of that, the goal should be time-bound, as this helps you focus your efforts, develop a more structured plan for actually achieving the goal, and creates a sense of urgency that can be motivating. Examples of measurable, specific, and time-bound goals include being able to deadlift 10 repetitions with 50 pounds in three months, running a 5K nonstop by the end of the year, and correctly performing a pull-up by the start of summer.

A great way to remember this is through the SMART method, which helps you make sure your goal is specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely.

### **4. Set the bar low—at least, at first.**

Speaking of attainable: "Your goal should seem relatively easy or within reach of what you are doing," Mike Clancy, NYC-based certified strength and conditioning specialist, tells SELF. Why? If you think it's easy, you have likely already worked through any mental obstacles that could thwart your progress, he explains. On the confidence scale, you should be at a 9 out of 10 when it comes to your belief that you'll actually achieve your goal. The less confident you are, the less likely you will adhere to the steps needed to make it happen, says Clancy.

Plus, attainable goals help ensure that you start out with some all-important wins. "The more success you have in your fitness journey, the more you will stay with it," adds Scantlebury. Having this success early on is especially important as it builds confidence that can snowball into long-term results.

### **5. Play the long game.**

We all want instant gratification, but it's important to be realistic with the time frame you develop for achieving your goal, says DiSalvo. "Lasting changes take a while," he explains.

Know that "you are never going to make an overhaul in one week," adds Scantlebury. Instead, pick a goal that can be achieved over the course of several months or even a year. A long-term mentality will help you see your goal as a lifestyle change, rather than quick fix, and you'll be much more likely to adhere to it.

### **6. Understand what's driving your goal.**

Sometimes fitness goals are driven by underlying fears, insecurities, or body image issues—like wanting to run a marathon because you were bullied in middle school gym class, or signing up for a CrossFit class because an ex once commented on your weight—and it's important to address these issues rather than assuming achieving your goal will assuage them.

"Depending on what you are trying to accomplish, it can stir up a lot of emotions," says DiSalvo. If thinking about your goal brings anxiety and/or triggers past mental struggles, consider talking with a mental health professional.

## **7. Be flexible in your definition of success.**

Though it is important to make your goal specific, it's also important to give yourself permission to alter it as you progress with your fitness journey. Perhaps a goal that seemed appropriately challenging at first is actually way too tough to maintain, or vice versa.

"If your definition of success is rigid, it will be hard to maintain that," says Vidal. Set goals you think you can achieve and then modify them as you understand more what you are capable of, Kollins Ezekh, certified personal trainer, group fitness expert and director of programming at Mayweather Boxing + Fitness, tells SELF. There's nothing wrong with moving the goal posts as you get more comfortable with your body's abilities.

## **8. Develop micro goals on the way to your big goal.**

Within your larger goal you should schedule in smaller, confidence-building goals that are achievable in a shorter time period. For example, say you want to run a nine-minute mile. During your training, you should make a smaller goal, like running a half mile in five minutes, to both show yourself how much you've accomplished and assess where you currently are. "It's all about those little victories," explains DiSalvo. "You want to be able to reward yourself mentally." Having to wait too long to feel like you've accomplished anything can diminish your motivation and pull you off track entirely.

In general, it's good to set micro goals that can be achieved every two to three weeks, suggests Clancy. That amount of time can help you determine if you're macro goal is realistic and provide the chance to scale things back if needed.

## **9. Consider a professional's input.**

If you're having a hard time evaluating your current fitness level, determining what would be a realistic goal, and/or just feeling overwhelmed about the process, it can be helpful to consult an expert, like a certified personal trainer. "A professional can help give you guidance on how realistic your goal is and can help you set markers along the way, so you can check in and confirm you are on the right track over time," says Ezekh.

At Fit Club NY, for example, Scantlebury will ask clients about various factors influencing their lifestyle, including their prior history with fitness (e.g. Have they trained before? Are they a former athlete? Do they have experience lifting weights?), their nutrition, their work and social history (e.g. Do they have a demanding, high-stress job? Do they go out frequently?, etc.). These questions aren't to judge; they're to understand, explains Scantlebury. "Once we understand their life, we can create a program around that works for them."

On top of that, Scantlebury will conduct several athletic tests—like endurance tests and strength tests—to assess someone's baseline level of fitness. Though you can ask yourself these questions and conduct fitness tests on yourself, if you're new to fitness, it may be helpful to get an expert's input.

## **10. Be honest about your prior and current habits.**

Asking yourself the tough questions can help you honestly evaluate what's most appropriate for you. Have you been somebody who in the past has crushed several fitness goals and just wants to take it to the next level? If that's the case, you could likely tackle a more complex goal, says DiSalvo, like running a long distance race at a certain pace.

But if you're new to fitness, which of course is totally okay, you may want to focus on more simple behavior modifications, like going to the gym a certain number of days a week, says DiSalvo.

"If you want to see measurable progression, you have to be realistic with what you are currently doing," says Clancy. If your routine doesn't involve any form of exercise, suddenly getting yourself to the gym five days a week—while certainly possible—may not be the most practical or realistic goal.

On top of that, it's helpful to consider what has stopped you from achieving goals in the past. If you have a chronically hard time getting up the morning, for example, sign up for evening workout classes rather than aiming for those 6 a.m. sessions. Being honest with yourself will help you identify and eliminate barriers before you get started.

## **11. Plan for a support system.**

When thinking about your goal, you should also think about who in your life could encourage, motivate, and hold you accountable to it. Then recruit them whenever you're in need of support. "If people you spend the most time with are supportive of your goals, it will make a huge difference," says Ezekh.

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