What You Can Do: Goal Setting

• **Be specific**. When you set yourself a goal, try to be as specific as possible. Lose five pounds is a better goal than lose some weight, because it gives you a clear idea of what success looks like. Knowing exactly what you want to achieve keeps you motivated until you get there. Avoid do your best goals—they are too vague to be really motivating.

• **Make it hard**. It’s also important when you set goals to make them difficult, while still being realistic. You want to challenge yourself and set the bar high, because challenges really get the motivational juices flowing, while avoiding goals that are more or less impossible. Remember that if you set the bar too low, you may achieve your goal but are unlikely to surpass it—most people tend to slack off once they’ve reached their original target. Nobody sets out with the goal of losing five pounds and ends up somehow losing twenty.

• **Think why or what**. Goals can be thought of in relatively abstract, why-am-I-doing-this terms or in more concrete, what-am-I-actually-doing terms. For example, dealing with the mess in your closets can be thought of as getting organized (why) or throwing out clothes I never wear (what). Think about your goals in why terms when you want to get energized, stay motivated, or avoid temptations. Think about your goals in what terms when you are dealing with something particularly difficult, unfamiliar, or anything that takes a long time to learn.

• **Consider value and feasibility**. Remember that we all tend to think more in why terms when contemplating our goals in the distant future. This leads us to give more weight to what’s desirable or valuable about the goal (like how much fun a trip to Disneyland would be) and too little weight to how feasible it is (as in, How the heck am I going to afford this trip to Disneyland? ). In the near future, we naturally think in what terms, which can lead to too much emphasis on being practical and not enough emphasis on enjoying what life has to offer. The best goals will usually be the ones you’ve adopted after weighing both desirability and feasibility in an unbiased way.

• **Think positive but don’t underestimate**. When you’re setting a goal, by all means engage in lots of positive thinking about how likely you are to achieve it. Believing in your ability to succeed is enormously helpful for creating and sustaining your motivation. But whatever you do, don’t underestimate how difficult it will be to reach your goal. Most goals worth achieving require time, planning, effort, and persistence. Thinking things will come to you easily and effortlessly will leave you ill prepared for the journey ahead, and as a result can be a recipe for failure.

• **Use mental contrasting to set your goals**. When you are thinking about taking on a new goal, make sure you think about both the wonderful things that will happen if you succeed and the obstacles that stand in your way. This process of mental contrasting will not only help you to make a good decision about whether or not to adopt the goal, but it will naturally engage your motivational systems and maximize your commitment to the goals that you do decide to achieve.