Understanding and setting SMART goals

New Year's Resolutions - most of us make them, few of us seem able to keep them. This time of year is ripe for hope and full of opportunity; we see it as a moment to look back on the year and resolve to change our behaviours. This usually means getting rid of what isn't working, and adding in that which will help us move closer towards who we would like to be.



One reason many of us don't continue with our resolutions is they are just too vague. Goals like "work out more", "eat better" or "be more grateful" are likely to fail, because no one really knows exactly what they mean.

Thankfully, there is a tested system for setting goals that are much more likely to be met. SMART goals are those that are: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. Below we'll break down each of these criteria, setting you up to make resolutions that you'll be able to follow through on.

Specific

A goal that is specific is more likely to be met than a goal that is general. For example, the general goal "be more grateful" could be made specific by changing it to "write down one thing I am thankful for before bed each night". To test if a goal is specific, ask yourself the five w-questions: *Who* is involved? *What* am I trying to accomplish? *Where* will this take place? *When* will I fit this goal into my day? And, *why* do I want to achieve this.

Measurable

Measurable goals are goals that you can quantify. This means including target dates and units of measurement in your goals. "Lose weight" is replaced by "lose 10lbs by March 1st". Goals can be made measurable by asking "how much?", "how often?", or "how many?" These measurements will mean you can track your progress and stay motivated.

Attainable and Realistic

It may seem obvious, but to be attainable, goals need to be, well, attainable. Don't set yourself up for failure by setting goals that you cannot or are not willing to achieve. This does not mean you need to set the bar low,

only that you need to be honest with yourself about what you are capable of doing in the time frame you have set, and how much energy you're willing to put into your goal.

Timely

To reach your goals, you need to place them within a time frame. If you tell yourself you will quit smoking, but don't set a date, that goal will end up getting pushed further and further into the future, until it's so far off that it doesn't exist. Set dates to give yourself an external pressure that will help you work towards your goals.

Once you have a resolution or goal that meets all these criteria, tell someone about it! This can mean simply telling your best friend or your spouse what you intend to do, or finding someone with whom to join forces and work towards the same goal together. Letting others know about your SMART goal will make you more accountable, and much more likely to achieve it.