

## How to Set Effective Action Plans & Systems

How many goals have you set in your lifetime? 10? 50? 100? And how many of those did you successfully achieve?

Goals are fickle. We can set goals all the time but a goal alone does not enforce action. In fact, a body of research suggests that setting goals is enough to satisfy people in the short-term, even if they do not achieve them in the long-term. And that is because goals are simply wishes with no real power over who we are or what we do. We need action plans and systems to meet those goals. Goals only tell us if the system is working.

On the next page is an action plan developed and researched by Gabriele Oettingen<sup>±</sup> and colleagues. Here is how to implement it:

1. **Identify goal:** Allow yourself to wish for the biggest change you want to make in your well-being. What is that wish? And when would you like to complete it, where, and the situation around the goal. This gives you clarity around your well-being intention.
2. **Identify Benefits:** This is another common practice when goal setting. If you hit your goal, what would that get you? And what values do you have that align with that goal? This helps get your motivation to achieve the goal set and also makes sure that you are pursuing something that actually matters, or is valued.
3. **Identify Barriers:** We all have them. And many are beyond our control. But some are internal—things we can control about our situation—or only appear out of our control. Identify those barriers.
4. **Prepare for Barriers:** Here is where you set your system in place. Only focus on the barriers to your goal that are within your control. What action, behavior, support system, habit, etc., will you set to address that barrier itself? This is when we shift our attention away from the goal, and away from uncontrollable barriers, and put in a system that gets us changing other barriers. The system/action is our focus and the goal will be a natural product as long as we engage with the system and make adjustments.
5. **Prepare for Opportunities:** If we are too focused on a goal, we sometimes miss the other opportunities or behaviors or systems that would actually help us get there. So what could you do to help keep aware of those opportunities or what will you do when they arise instead of being hyper-focused on **only** the goal.

<sup>±</sup>Oettingen, G., & Gollwitzer, P. (2010). *Strategies of setting and implementing goals: Mental contrasting and implementation intentions* (pp. 114-135).

# Individual Action Planning

**Identify Goal:** *My goal is*

\_\_\_\_\_.  
*I plan to do the  
goal* \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ [Specify time, date, place, and context of goal].

**Identify Benefits:** *Imagine the most positive benefit of achieving the goal. What would it look like? How does it align with your personal and professional values?*

*Example structure: If I work toward [goal], it would [benefits]. It would also connect me to my values of [values].*

---

---

---

---

---

**Identify Barriers:** *What are the most critical obstacles to achieving this goal? Which ones do you have control over? Which ones do you not? And which can you get more control over?*

---

---

---

---

---

**Prepare for Barriers:** *What will you do if you encounter critical obstacles?*

*If* \_\_\_\_\_ [barrier] *arises, I*  
*will* \_\_\_\_\_ [goal-supporting action].

*If* \_\_\_\_\_ [barrier] *arises, I*  
*will* \_\_\_\_\_ [goal-supporting action].

**Prepare for Opportunities:** *What proactive actions or opportunities will you watch for that help progress toward your goal,*

*If* \_\_\_\_\_ [opportunity] *arises, I*  
*will* \_\_\_\_\_ [goal-supporting action].



Mid-America (HHS Region 7)

**MHTTC**

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network  
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration