

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Set Small Goals to Stress Less

Risa Williams · Friday, August 7th, 2020

Time is blurring together. That's the main thing I'm hearing from people these days. Many can't remember what day of the week it is, many are having trouble keeping track of what month it is, and it is challenging to mentally process how much time has already gone by and what the near future will look like. Time is starting to feel really surreal to most people, especially here in Los Angeles, where many of us have been stuck inside since March.

Before March, our brains were used to a daily story that happened: We got in our cars to commute and/or drop kids off at school and we eventually arrived at our work destination. Sometimes, on good days when we remembered to stop working, we took lunch breaks. After a few hours, we picked kids up from school and/or returned home, made dinner, and sometimes relaxed for a little while. On top of that, there were seasons to divvy up the time. In the summer, the kids' schedules changed, and sometimes, we went on vacations or trips, and all of this helped us keep track of where we were in the year. Now, all of this has drastically changed. We are navigating our offices from inside our bedrooms (or hallways/dining rooms/living rooms), our kids are wearing headsets like mini-office workers, and everyone is shushing each other to avoid accidentally saying something embarrassing while on calls with supervisors/teachers. As a result, our brains no longer know what day/time/month/season it is, it just feels like one endless stretch of Zoom meetings.

So, how do we break up our days to help us navigate the time ahead? My solution has been setting mini-goals for myself each week. It's something I've been working with my clients on, and it generally helps people feel like they are making progress, moving forward, and creating more of a personal journey during these stressful times. Our brains like to accomplish small goals and to feel rewarded for doing them. It can help reduce anxiety, it can give us something to look forward to, and it can help increase the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is associated with the reward center in our brains. Also, it can help ground you in what feels like a sea of indistinguishable time.

Here are a few simple goal-setting techniques that might help you:

- 1. Work on setting one mini-goal a week.**

Often, we get carried away with setting goals that feel too challenging or too overwhelming to actually tackle. For instance, instead of setting a goal to go running every single day, set a goal that feels more accomplishable, perhaps go running two times a week instead of every day. You can always increase the amount later, after you've learned to reward yourself for the small goal you've accomplished. It's better to start small and ramp it up slowly.

2. **Mentally prep yourself before starting your task.**

Before you decide to take on your small goal that you've set for yourself, spend the day before imagining yourself doing it. I call this "mental prep work". When you get your mind in a place to do the task by picturing it a bunch of times, you lower your resistance to doing the task on the day you've set for it. It only takes a few minutes of picturing the task ahead of time to allow your brain to prepare for it. It increases the chance that you will actually do the task as well.

3. **Write down your goal somewhere you can see it daily.**

Write down your goal on a post-it or somewhere you can see it daily. Some people use phone alarms and this works well for them, other people prefer to use a piece of paper on their desk. It just depends on your personality. I'm definitely more likely to write something down on paper as I have so many alerts on my phone, it's easy to accidentally ignore them. Also, I enjoy the feeling of crossing something out on paper when it's done. Let yourself feel the relief when you're done with the item on your list! When we connect with the positive emotions associated with completing a goal, we are sending a message to our brains that the task was worth the effort.

4. **Talk to yourself in an encouraging way.**

Most people get stuck with setting goals because they tend to be overly hard on themselves. They criticize themselves a lot, and they reprimand themselves if they don't do something perfectly. This just creates negative brain associations associated with the goal that aren't going to help you. Ease up on yourself. If you go for one run instead of two, be kind to yourself. Give yourself praise. Tell yourself it's a good start! Talk to yourself like a good coach, instead of like a negative one.

5. **Schedule a small reward for completing your small goal.**

For each small goal that you complete, give yourself a small, fun reward. If it was hard to do yoga stretches, but you did it anyway, then reward yourself with a nice chai latte afterward, if that's what you set as your treat. What are some small rewards you can give yourself? Watch a fun movie, have a nice treat, take a bubble bath, read the new novel you've been looking forward to... Delay using these rewards on other days and save them for after you accomplish your small goal! Your brain will then get the "treat" it's expecting after the challenge. You are now teaching your brain to expect positive feedback instead of negative criticism.

6. **Make sure to schedule down time in between goals.**

This has been the most important lesson I've learned this year. Down time is just as important as work time. Life shouldn't be all about meeting one goal after another, while enjoying none of the time spent doing it. Take some down time after you accomplish something to reflect upon it, to feel proud of yourself, and to be really kind to yourself. Give your brain the encouragement and praise it needs so that the next task ahead will go easier for you. That way, instead of avoiding your weekly goals, you will start to enjoy accomplishing them more. And, who knows, it might even help you remember what day of the week it is, too.

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