

MAKING YOURSELF HAPPY
The value of setting short-term goals
An essay by Ted Sielaff
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If you are a so-so tennis player and you challenge the local champion and he takes you seriously, you will be vanquished. Perhaps you have high expectations, but your defeat makes you feel terrible, and you think you should give up the game.

What is wrong? Your expectations are too high.

Now, if you played with someone whose skills were closer to your's, you would stand a chance of winning – and you would feel good about your game and yourself. You have lowered your expectations, and you get that happy feeling.

Expect too much and you are unhappy. Lower your expectations, you reach your goals, and you are happy.

New Year's Resolutions work like that. They can easily frustrate you like that champion tennis player who made you feel defeated and terrible, and caused you to think you never want to have another goal for yourself.

I want to help you go about this matter more sensibly.

New Year's Resolutions are behaviorally unsound. In order to keep doing something, we need periodic reinforcement, like recognition or reward. That is lacking with New Year's Resolutions. Usually New Year's Resolutions are too grandiose, like: I'm going to get myself fit this year. Or, I'm going to finish my MBA this year. Too much for most of us.

In setting goals, you can be happy if the goal is doable -- something, that is within your power to accomplish in a relatively short period of time. It is like playing tennis with someone close to your skill.

First, I believe the setting of goals is very important if you want a happy life and want to get along in this rough-and-tumble world.

It may seem strange, but there are people who do not understand that simple idea. They drift along and are pushed by whatever they encounter. Maybe you have seen people like that.

I have been setting goals for myself for many years and have kept many of the papers on which I wrote them. Some of my lists were nuts; and others were quite clever. In this essay I will share what I have learned. This is a practical discussion.

Make short term goals that are in harmony with some long term strategy you might have. Don't make a resolution for a year. For example, suppose your long term strategy is to write a book. It does no good to say: "This year I intend to finish writing a book."

I have found it better to set goals for just a month, like this: "I want to finish the first draft of the chapter of my book on "The People Living in Yosemite Park." That would be a doable goal if I worked at it every day and had my research done. And, at the end of the month, I could check to see if I reached it.

Not everybody will be writing a book on the parks of America. Maybe you will be doing something more practical and useful like landscaping your front yard, cleaning out your garage, or trying to lose weight. The point is: Don't try to take on the whole world. Make goals you can accomplish and feel good about after you have completed them.

In stating the short term goal, you should make it specific and measurable. Don't say something like: "I intend to write every day." That is too vague.

I have found that if I set short term goals for myself that are in harmony with a bigger strategy that I have I can be very happy. And, the interesting thing is that these short term goals often fit together in building a bigger picture.

Too many goals can frustrate you. Picture this: You are getting the family ready for an outing at the park and people tell you to turn off the radio, pick up the papers in front, water the plants, set out food for the dog, give the key to the neighbor, see that there is gas in the car, bring along some spare clothes, don't forget the camera,

and on and on. You get mad and shout: “Shut up! Quit hassling me!”

You set up the same situation if you list too many things as your goals. So, keep the list short. Make it something where you will easily do everything and be victorious – be the winner.

I find it works best if I make a list each month of 7 or 8 things I want to finish. I write them down and post them on my bulletin board. If my goal is too unrealistic, I modify it. Goals should not be set in stone. If I write my goals down, I can see where I am going.

I have a list for this month and one item is “Write an essay,” That is what I am doing right now. It is doable.

Many years ago, I wanted to get a PhD in economics at the University of Minnesota. Ginny and I lived in a little house in St. Paul, had one son, and Ginny was a full time housewife and mother. I earned a very modest salary at a small college and had no savings, scholarships, or wealthy parents. We had no car and we rode buses or streetcars wherever we went. I had to work.

First, I found out the requirements for the PhD degree. And, then I planned to take one course and work on a research project each term. After a few years, I was amazed at how far along I was and that success stimulated me to work harder. So, I was finally honored in 1951 with a PhD degree in economics. You see: Little items can work into a bigger plan.

So, my advice is get busy on goals. Forget the New Year’s Resolutions stuff. It’s not helpful. But, small goals that are in harmony with a bigger plan can make you a winner and will be fun.

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