

Training Your Brain To Adopt Healthful Habits:

Mastering The Five Brain Challenges Third Edition 2019

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Published by:
Institute for Brain Potential (IBP)

Exercise 1H: Turning Values and Goals into a Plan of Action

How do we recognize thoughts and behaviors that are do not align with our values and goals? A first step is to be aware of our own values and goals. While we all have values and goals, we may not have thought about them and laid them out explicitly. If our values and goals are only hazy concepts, we may be less likely to factor them into our decisions. Taking time to identify and describe our values and goals can help us get started towards making choices that lead toward our dreams.

Recognizing the relationships between your specific thoughts and behaviors and your values and goals can help you reevaluate the benefits and costs of those thoughts and behaviors and potentially motivate change. Doing this, of course, requires that you are aware of your own values and goals. Only then can you start to consider whether your behaviors are helpful or contradictory to the things you are trying to achieve.

Step 1: Identifying Your Values

Psychologists and life coaches have come up with a variety of exercises to help you think about and identify your values. The main goal of these exercises is to help you consider what matters to you and what you value about yourself. It is fine to simply brainstorm on your own and write down what you think. Alternatively, you may find some of the thought exercises are helpful for identifying values that are important to you.

Allport-Vernon Classification

The Allport-Vernon classification of values (Allport et al., 1970) categorizes six major types of values and was designed to help people explore their own tendency toward different domains. Conspicuously missing from this classification is the value of Health, to which the attainment of all other objectives is secondary. Without our health, we are not fully functioning in our capacity to engage with and follow through on our personal values. However, the framework may still be useful to in identifying some of your own values and goals. The classifications are as follows:

1. Theoretical: Interest in the discovery of truth through reasoning and systematic thinking.
2. Economic: Interest in usefulness and practicality, including the accumulation of wealth.
3. Aesthetic: Interest in beauty, form and artistic harmony.
4. Social: Interest in people and human relationships.
5. Political: Interest in gaining power and influencing other people.
6. Religious: Interest in unity and understanding the cosmos as a whole.

You can explore your values in these areas by taking the online test at:
<http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/valuestest.html>

Thought Experiments

Additionally, we have generated some thought experiments to help you make a list of values that you feel play some role in your life. You may find it helpful to phrase your values in terms of "I" statements.

- 10
1. Imagine someone is going to give a speech about you in the future (e.g. a eulogy, a retirement party, a 50th wedding anniversary party, an 85th birthday party). What would you like them to say about you? How do you hope they see you and your life accomplishments? What matters to you most?
 2. List 5 people you highly admire. Why do you admire them? What do they have in common? What aspects of these people's lives or behaviors do you wish to share? What about these people do you value?
 3. Pretend you are writing a resume for a dream job of your own design. What will you do in your dream job? What will you accomplish? What will your day-to-day work look like? What makes you perfect for this job? What do you want a prospective employer to know about you?
 4. Imagine you could achieve your "best self," whatever that means to you. How would you live your life? What would you seek to accomplish for yourself and for others?

Step 2: Prioritizing Your Values

Once you have generated an initial list, it is important to prioritize the values you identified. Often your values will be competing for time, energy, and resources. Understanding which values are more important to you will help you design goals and action plans that avoid compromising one value to achieve another one. In this step, we will attempt to order our values based on their personal importance.

To start, let's say I (J.T.) came up with this list of personal values after doing the exercises above:

I am healthy.

I am surrounded by happy people.

I am learning new things.

I am making the world a better place.

I can provide for my family and myself.

I am not wasting resources.

Now consider these values in pairs, and think about what you would do if you had to choose between them. Go through each pair and mark the one that you would favor if you had to choose between them. For example, if forced to choose between being healthy and being surrounded by happy people, I would choose to be healthy around grumpy folks. So I would give one point to "I am healthy". If forced to choose between being healthy and learning new things, I again would choose to be healthy and stuck with my current knowledge and abilities. So I would give a second point to "I am healthy." After going through all the comparisons on the list, add up the points given to each pair of comparisons. This should clarify how you prioritize the values in your life. Although all of the values you list may be important to you, life requires choosing between them at various points. By understanding how you choose between your priorities, you can better predict places where your values may contradict and avoid creating goals and action plans that pit one value against another one.

For example, consider my (J.T.'s) choices in graduate school. While in graduate school, I had virtually endless opportunities to learn new things. There were always seminars on exciting new topics, and evening classes about new fields I never even considered. I could always keep working on my own research projects, carrying out experiments to give me answers to questions I identified. Graduate school was like a candy store for my inner nerd and I was a shameless binge eater. As encouraged by my program, I began graduate school focused on that one value (i.e. learning new things), but found myself getting more and more unhappy over time. I eventually got to the point that I did not really want to be in graduate school at all. Recognizing that I did not feel well and was not paying close attention to my health, I made some changes in my priorities, goals and behaviors to reflect my high priority on being healthy. I made myself leave the school at 5:00 to go work out at the gymnastics gym down the street. I stopped going to evening classes with less than nutritious dinners and started cooking for myself every night. With these changes, I was much happier, healthier and still learning new things, perhaps slightly more slowly, but now not at the expense of my other values. By recognizing the priorities among my values, I was able to fix my goals and behaviors so that they were in line with my values and their relative importance to me.

This example not only demonstrates the importance of prioritizing values, but also in developing goals and action plans that match these values. Just knowing that I care more about being healthy than learning new things does not help unless I come up with concrete goals and plans for becoming healthy that I can carry out in my life. Clarifying my values told me what I needed to focus on, but goal-setting and action planning was required to turn that into specific changes in behavior (i.e. going to the gym at 5:00 and cooking my own dinners). Thus, after you have clarified your goals it is essential that you take what you find and turn to the process of goal-setting.

Step 3: Turning Your Values into Goals and Action Plans

While your values may be conceptual, hazy and subjective in nature, it is important that your goals and action plans are concrete and measurable. Goals need to be specific and objective so that you can determine how to achieve them and when they have been met. As you develop a goal and an action plan to meet that goal, focus on making the goals and action plans specific, feasible, doable and verifiable. What exactly do you want to achieve? Is that goal something you could realistically achieve? Is there a behavior you could do to bring you closer to achieving your goal? Is there a way for you to know (1) when you have done the helpful behavior and (2) when you have achieved your goal? If your goals and action plans meet these criteria, then they will be useful in helping you live according to your values.

We provide you with an Action Plan worksheet to help guide you in developing a goal and an action plan to meet it. It will also help you document your goals and plans so that you are more likely to stick to the plan, and help you when you encounter problems. On the next page is a sample worksheet that describes a goal and action plan to help me (J.T.) meet my value of "being healthy". On the page following that is a blank worksheet. After you read through the example, pick one of your values and use the worksheet to develop a goal and action plan to help you live according to that value.



Sample Action Plan

The healthful change I want to make is: to eat more fruits and vegetables

My goal for next month is: to start every dinner with a salad or vegetable dish

The steps I will take to achieve my goal are (what, when, where, how much, how often):

1. I will go to the local farmer's market on Saturday and purchase fruits and vegetables for these salads/dishes for the upcoming week.
2. I will prepare a salad or vegetable dish for each dinner.
3. I will not eat anything else for dinner until I finish my serving of the salad or vegetable dish.

The things that could make it difficult to achieve my goal include: I do not have a lot of experience making tasty salads or vegetable dishes. It could be hard to think of things to make or decide what and how much to buy at the farmer's market.

My plan for overcoming these difficulties includes: I will purchase several cookbooks with seasonal recipes for salads and vegetable dishes. Before I go to the farmer's market, I will pick at least three recipes a week to try and will write down the ingredients.

Support/resources I will need to achieve my goal include: I will need time to go shopping on Saturday, so my family should not schedule other things that require my help during that time. Also, it would be helpful to have my family's support regarding eating more vegetables for dinner. It will be harder to stick to the goal if they complain about the food at every dinner. I will talk with them about my goal and see if they wish to help in choosing recipes, preparing food and shopping.

My confidence level (scale from 0-10, 10 being completely confident that you can achieve the entire plan): 7

What can you do to increase your confidence? If I find difficulty in following this plan then I will re-assess it after two weeks. I can change it to 2 recipes a week or invite a friend who is more experienced at preparing these dishes to help me learn how to make them. I know that if I keep revising the action plan I can make it work.

Plan for feedback and monitoring:

How will you monitor actions? I will write down our dinner menu every night in a notebook.

When will your actions be reviewed? My best friend (who is attempting the same action plan) and I will meet once a week to review our successes and failures, problem-solve difficulties and share solutions.

WORKSHEET: Action Plan

The healthful change I want to make is:

My goal for next month is:

The steps I will take to achieve my goal are (what, when, where, how much, how often):

The things that could make it difficult to achieve my goal include:

My plan for overcoming these difficulties includes:

Support/resources I will need to achieve my goal include:

My confidence level (scale from 0-10, 10 being completely confident that you can achieve the entire plan):

What can you do to increase your confidence?

Plan for feedback and monitoring:

How will you monitor actions?

When will your actions be reviewed?

*Adapted from Jason M. Satterfield, Ph.D., University of California at San Francisco.
Action plan forms in English, Spanish and Chinese can be downloaded at:
http://www.familymedicine.medschool.ucsf.edu/community_service/actionPlan.asp*