



## All or Nothing – Learning to Learn

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### **Setting Goals - SMART, but REAL**

One popular way to think about goal setting is a system called SMART goals. The ideas in it are great, but they might not be the whole story - see what you think. Basically, this system says that to be successful in reaching your goals, you should make them **SMART**:

**S – Specific.** Goals should be written out with exact details on what they are. So, instead of "I want to upgrade my education", decide "I want to get my grade 12 equivalency."

**M – Measurable.** How will you know whether you have reached your goal? It needs to have a result that can be named and measured, like "I want to get a GED certificate."

**A – Attainable.** Goals have to be things you can actually see yourself doing, not just wishes. If you want to be in a full time program, but you are raising four children under 10 years old and working two jobs, a full time program might not be attainable until you make a few other changes. Part time or online courses might be, though...

**R – Realistic.** Goals should be things that you can do at this time. "I want to go to medical school" can be a goal you announce after you've got your high school diploma, and your undergraduate degree.

**T – Time-based.** Goals do best with an end point or clear deadline; "I want to get a GED certificate by July 1st."

These words are clear, and very logical. But we can't always be logical, because our history and experiences shape our spirit and the emotions that come up when we try to think about the future. Talking about goals this way can make some of us go even harder on ourselves, feeling like there is something wrong with us or our lives if the changes we want to make don't come easily or quickly. Sometimes to help us hold to the idea that change is possible at all, we need to learn to dream first.

### ***Other ideas about setting goals might be helpful***

1. Try to see yourself as an old friend, and think about your life, about how you got here and where you're going. Life has not been a straight line, but this story is yours and yours alone. In a world of billions of people, there is only ONE you! There are gazillions of atoms in your body, all working together in the tiny area of the universe that you occupy.
2. Find support – people you trust and who believe that you can reach the goals you set. Tell them about what you want to do. See if they have ideas. Have a laugh.
3. When you feel despair, try to remember what someone who believes in you would tell you! Visit them or call them up if you can, or if you can't, then imagine their words as clearly as you can.
4. You have to be ready to make changes – and only you can know if you are ready. YOU get to decide. Challenge yourself, but don't try to force yourself to do anything unless you are ready – it just won't work!
5. Express your goals in positive or optimistic language – focus on what you do want, instead of what you don't. Think of it as starting new habits, not "breaking" old ones.
6. Be honest. What are you really willing or able to do or to change? Be honest about what is really important to you – right now. Some goal-setting exercises talk about 'setting your priorities'. For example, when your children are very young, maybe doing two college courses will work better than doing five. Maybe the month your father dies is not the right time to quit smoking.
7. If you can, break every goal down into small, concrete, do-able steps. Then focus on just the next step. When you get anxious about steps that are further down the road, bring yourself back to the present. Focus on the step you are on.
8. You deserve that thing you want to do, to change, or to feel – you deserve a life you want.

9. You can change your mind any time you need to. If a goal is too big, you can adjust it as your deadline gets closer (*"Okay, I'll get the Math and Biology courses this year and the Communications next year..."*). You do not have to give up and quit. Keep finding ways to fine-tune your goals so they work for you. If you like, you can make the goal a bit tougher, too (*"Hey, I think I can do it by May 1st!"*). Support, being ready, honesty, optimism, and permission to take breaks, to change your mind - these will help keep your goals and your expectations real.

### ***Between All and Nothing, there's "Middle Ground"***

\*\*\*If you haven't already read "Understanding the Problem" in this resource section, it will be helpful to read it first.\*\*\*

*"One day I realized that my baby steps, which seemed too small to count, had taken me across the universe."*

Francesca de Grandis

When we get caught in 'all or nothing' thinking (bouncing between extremes like "I'll ACE this course" and "I'm too stupid to EVER pass"), we often hear that we need to 'find the middle ground'. But what does this really mean? What would it look like to try to do this with schoolwork and learning?

Well, say you're being hard on yourself to stick to a promise to 'finish this program by April'. But stuff happens and it's already February and your marks aren't so good. So then you find yourself thinking "Forget it - I'm just going to QUIT. This school thing was never going to work for me anyhow." That's all or nothing thinking.

To find middle ground here, you have to get a bit curious and a bit creative (and a lot brave!). Is quitting the only way? What about going part time? What about dropping your worst course and finishing the others? Or only finishing your two favourite courses? What about asking if you can do one from home? Or, okay, quitting - but instead of just disappearing, talk to your teachers about starting the next term from where you left off. Those are some examples of middle ground.

When we feel like we're screwing up, it's easy to slide into "Well I ALWAYS screw up and NOTHING ever changes!" But whenever you hear yourself saying 'always' and 'never', remember how there have been changes in your life. They might have been small, or over a long time, but you have managed to change.

### ***Practical Ways to See it***

There are lots of practical ways to see it. You could make a list or a chart – even in your head – of all the little things that have gotten better over time. Friendships you kept. How you eat a bit healthier than you used to. How this apartment you live in is a bit nicer than your last one. You got that SIN card! You started flossing your teeth, stopped biting your nails. That's the thing about real progress – it happens in little steps.

For some of us, 'finding middle ground' is actually really complicated work. If we experienced violence in the past, we might have lived in 'do or die' survival mode a lot. 'Right' and 'wrong' are sharp opposites if wrong means getting hurt. So now we might not be great at seeing all the little 'maybes' between 'yes' and 'no'.

With learning, small daily efforts add up to gradual change. These efforts can feel boring, too small to matter. It's a whole new way of thinking. Mistakes are not bad, they're a necessary part of learning for everyone. Is it hard to trust that? You're not alone.

Little by little, day by day, you can learn to live here: middle ground – it's on the ground, not down some hellish hole, not in a perfect heaven up in the sky. Just regular life with good and bad and boring bits. And with schoolwork, we can just do something – we don't have to do it all, but we can do more than nothing.