

Stage 1: Ideal Future

One thing to do better

If you could choose only one thing that you could do better, what would it be?

Things to learn about

What would you like to learn more about in the next six months? Two years? Five Years?

Improve your habits

What habits would you like to improve?

- At work?
- With friends and family?
- For your health, energy and focus?

Your social life in the future

Friends and associates are an important part of a meaningful, productive life. Take a moment to consider your social network. Think about the friends you might want to have, and the connections you might want to make. It is perfectly reasonable to choose friends and associates who are good for you. Describe your ideal social life.

Your leisure activity in the future

Take a moment to consider the activities you would like to pursue outside of obligations such as work, family and school. The activities you choose should be worthwhile and personally meaningful. Describe what your leisure life would be like, if it was set up to be genuinely productive and enjoyable.

Your family life in the future

Take a moment to consider your home and family life. Peaceful, harmonious family life provides people with a sense of belonging, support for their ambitions, and reciprocal purpose. Describe what your ideal family would be like. You can write about your parents and siblings, or about your plans for your own partner(s), or about your children, if any – or about all of these. What kind of partner(s) would be good for you? How could you improve your relationship with your parents or siblings?

Your career in the future

Much of what people find engaging in life is related to their careers. A meaningful career provides security, status, interest, and/or the possibility of contributing to the community. Take a moment to consider your school or work careers, or both. Where do you want to be in six months? Two years? Five years? Why? What are you trying to accomplish?

Qualities you admire

People you automatically admire have qualities that you would like to possess or imitate. Identifying those qualities can help you determine who it is that you want to be. Take a moment to think about the two or three people you most admire. Who are they? Which qualities do they possess that you wish you had?

The Ideal Future: Complete summary

Now you have written briefly about your future, and have had some time to consider more specific issues. This step gives you the chance to integrate all the things that you have just thought and wrote about.

Close your eyes. Daydream, if you can, and imagine your ideal future:

- Who do you want to be?
- What do you want to do?
- Where do you want to end up?
- Why do you want these things?
- How do you plan to achieve your goals?
- When will you put your plans into action?

Write about the ideal future that you have just imagined for 15 minutes. Write continuously and try not to stop while you are writing. Don't worry about spelling or grammar. You will have an opportunity to fix your mistakes later.

Dream while you write, and don't stop. Write at least until the 15 minutes have passed. Be ambitious. Imagine a life that you would regard as honourable, exciting, productive, creative and decent.

Remember, you are writing only for yourself. Choose goals that you want to pursue for your own private reasons, not because someone else thinks that those goals are important. You don't want to live someone else's life. Include your deepest thoughts and feelings about all your personal goals.

A future to avoid: Complete summary

You have now written about the future you would like to have. Clearly defining your future can help reduce the uncertainty in your life, and reduce the amount of negative emotion that you chronically experience, in consequence. This is constructive for your confidence and for your health. Having well-defined goals also increases your chances of experiencing positive emotion, as people experience most of their hope and joy and curiosity and engagement as a consequence of pursuing valued goals (and not, as people generally think, by attaining them). It can also be very useful to deeply imagine the future you would like to avoid. You probably know people who have made very bad decisions, and who end up with a life that nobody would want. You also likely have weaknesses yourself. If you let those get out of control, then you might also end up with a miserable, painful life. Most people know how their life could go downhill if they let it.

Spend some time, now, thinking about what your life would be like if you failed to define or pursue your goals, if you let your bad habits get out of control, and if you ended up miserable, resentful and bitter. Imagine your life three to five years down the road, if you failed to stay on the path you know you should be on. Use your imagination. Draw on your knowledge of the anxiety and pain you have experienced in the past, when you have betrayed yourself.

Think about the people you know who have made bad decisions or remained indecisive, or who chronically deceive themselves or other people, or who let cynicism and anger dominate their lives. Where do you not want to be?

Dream while you write, and don't stop. Write at least until the 15 minutes have passed. Let yourself form a very clear picture of the undesirable future.

Stage 2: Clarify your goals

In this stage, you will first be asked to define and personally title your overall future plan. Then, you will be asked to take your general plans for the ideal future and break them up into more specific goals. Each of these separate goals will also be given its own title. This step will help you clarify your goals.

Please break down your ideal future into 8 goals. You can re-word, re-write and organize the relevant material from the earlier steps for your goal summaries, if you wish, or you can rely on your memory.

These specific goals can be from a number of different domains.

- A personal goal might be "I would like to be healthier."
- A career goal might be "I would like to be more interested in my job"
- A social goal might be "I would like to meet more people".

The summaries you write about each goal should be reasonably brief and memorable. Make sure that each goal summary includes nothing but the most important information. You will have 10-15 minutes for this part of the exercise. Feel free to revise and edit.

Prioritizing your goals

Please organize your goals. Give your most important goal a rank of 1, your next most important goal a rank of 2, and so on.

Strategizing about your goals

For each of the 8 goals, please write about these aspects:

- Evaluating your motives
- Considering the broad personal and social impact of the goal
- Considering the detailed strategies for goal attainment
- Identifying potential obstacles and their solutions
- Monitoring progress towards the desired goal

These are some points to consider for each of the aspects:

Evaluating your motives

You might want to consider issues such as the following:

- Do you truly believe that pursuing this goal is important?
- Would you feel ashamed, guilty or anxious if you didn't?
- Do you want to achieve this goal personally, or are you doing it to please someone else? (It is often a good thing to do something for someone else, but you should know when you are doing that.)
- Are you pursuing this goal because the situation that you find yourself in seems to demand it?
- Is the pursuit of this goal enjoyable, stimulating or satisfying?
- Is this goal part of a deeply felt personal dream?

Considering the broad personal and social impact of the goal

Goals can have an impact beyond the obvious. Our specific personal goals are connected to larger, more important life goals. These higher-order goals reflect our most important ideals. The specific goal of spending more time studying or reading, for example, is a specific element of the more important goal of being a well-educated person. Achieving other specific goals, such as becoming more assertive, help us to move closer to our ideal self.

You will now be asked to write about what more globally important things might be affected by your attainment of the goal listed below:

- How would disciplined success change the way that you see yourself?
- How would other parts of your personal life change, in consequence?
- How would this affect the way that others perceive you? (You might also consider fears of being successful. Sometimes people are afraid to succeed because of the responsibility this would entail. Sometimes they are afraid of even becoming conscious of their true goals, because then they would be aware when they fail. These are not constructive strategies.)
- How would attaining this goal affect the lives of the people around you?
- What broader beneficial social impact might your success have?

Please write a short description of how attaining this goal would change additional important aspects of your life, and the lives of others.

Considering the detailed strategies for goal attainment

Goals are related to lesser, smaller sub-goals and behaviors, as well as connected to higher-order, more important abstract goals. Sub-goals are easier to achieve, but are still fundamental to reaching our greater aspirations. Sub-goals can thus be thought of as strategies for greater goal achievement. Thinking about what specific things need to be done in order to achieve your goals allows you to create practical strategies for realizing your dreams. Please take some time to write about the concrete daily or weekly things you might do to further your goal. Deeply consider what particular behaviors this goal is built upon.

- Should you spend more time planning at school or at work?
- Do you need to spend more time with your friends, or your children?
- Do you need to discuss household chores with your roommates or partner(s)?

Specify when you are going to work on your goal. Specify how often. Specify where. Think hard about how you are going to implement your plans. Make your plans concrete.

Write down those concrete weekly or daily things you might do to further this goal.

Identifying potential obstacles and their solutions

Thinking about achieving a goal is obviously easier than going out and getting it done. Many things related to the natural environment, the social group and the self can stand in your way. It is useful to anticipate these difficulties, so that you can plan to overcome them.

Consider your goal, once again. Write down all the potential obstacles you can think up. Write down ways to overcome these obstacles.

How might you interfere with your own plans? How can you ensure this won't happen?

Sometimes change is threatening to people we know and love. Will the people you know help you, or interfere? How can you communicate with them, so that they will support you? Think of realistic and worst-case scenarios. What are your options? What are your alternative plans?

Write down potential obstacles to this goal, and specify the ways you might overcome them.

Monitoring progress towards desired goals

We need to know, concretely, whether or not we are progressing towards the attainment of valued goals. Of course, this is not an easy task. When we want to complete very specific tasks, feedback on our performance is relatively easy to monitor. However, if our goals are less short-term, this becomes a little more difficult.

You are now being asked to identify personal benchmarks that will allow you to evaluate your own performance.

- When would you like to achieve this goal? Be specific. Even if you have to revise a deadline later, it is still better to set one.
- What sorts of things will you accept as evidence that you are progressing towards your stated goal?
- How often are you going to monitor your own behavior?
- How will things in your life have to change, measurably, for you to feel satisfied in your progress?
- How can you ensure that you are neither pushing yourself too hard, and ensuring failure, or being too easy on yourself, and risking boredom and cynicism?

Your benchmarks should be personal indicators of success. It doesn't matter what others may think defines progress towards your goal. Write down those accomplishments that would truly indicate positive movement on your part. Feel free to write as much as you feel is necessary. Write down how you might monitor your progress with regards to this goal.