

MAKING ACTION PLANS

An action plan is a specific action that you are confident you can accomplish within the next week. It's an agreement or contract with yourself. Action plans are one of your most important self-care tools. An action plan is a step toward reaching your long-term goal. It is to be something you want to do. It is not to be something you feel you should do, have to do, or need to do. The intent of making an action plan is to help you to feel better and to take better care of yourself. Remember, an action plan is a want to do. Here are the five steps for making an action plan:

1. Decide What You Want To do - Think about what is realistic for you to accomplish within the next week. It's important that an action plan is reachable; other-wise, you are likely to experience frustration. An action plan is to help you experience success - not frustration, increased stress, or failure. An action plan starts with the words, *I will*. If you find yourself saying *I will try to...*, *I have to...*, or *I should...*, then re-examine your action plan. It probably is not something that you truly want to do.

2. Make Your Plan Behavior-Specific - The more specific your action plan, the greater your chances of accomplishing it. For example, taking better care of myself is not a specific behavior. However, making an appointment for a physical check-up, walking three times a week, getting a massage on Thursday afternoon, or asking someone to stay with your family member for one morning are all specific behaviors. I will relax also is not a specific behavior; however, reading a book, listening to your favorite music, or putting in the garden are specific behaviors.

Parts Of An Action Plan

- It's something you want to do
- It's reachable (something you believe you will be able to accomplish during the next week).
- It answers these questions:
 - What?
 - How much?
 - When?
 - How often?
- It has a high confidence level. (You are certain that you will be able to complete your entire action plan during the next week.)

3. Make a Specific Plan - Making a specific plan is often difficult, yet it is the most important part of making an action plan. A specific plan answers these four questions:

- *What are you going to do?* Examples: I will read (book name) for pleasure. Or, I will walk.
- *How much will you do?* Examples: Will you read one chapter or will you read for a half hour? Will you walk two blocks or for 20 minutes?
- *When will you do this?* Examples: Will you read the first thing in the morning when you awaken, before you go to bed, when the care receiver is sleeping, or...? If your plan is to walk, when during the day will you do it?
- *How often will you do this activity?* Example: Three times a week on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

A common mistake is to make an action plan that is unreachable within the time frame. For example, if you plan to do something every day, you might fail. Caregiving, and life in general, has its surprises. Although well-intentioned, it's often not possible to do something every day. It's better to plan to do something once or twice a week and exceed your action plan than to plan to do something every day and fail because you only did it six days, rather than seven. Remember, an action plan is meant to help you to take better care of yourself and to experience success. The last

thing you need is additional pressure, disappointment, and stress. Here are two recommendations for writing an action plan that can help you achieve success.

- Start where you are or start slowly - If there's a book you've been wanting to read, but just haven't found the time, it may not be realistic to expect to read the entire book in the next week. Instead, try reading for a half hour twice during the week. If you haven't been physically active, it may be unrealistic to make an action plan so start walking three miles. It is better to make your action plan for something that you believe you can accomplish. For example, make your plan for walking three blocks or a half mile, rather than three miles.
- Give yourself time off - We all have days when we don't feel like doing anything. That's the advantage of saying you will do something three days a week, rather than every day. That way, if you don't feel like doing something on one day, or something develops that prevents you from doing it, you can still achieve your action plan.

4. Determine Your Confidence Level - Once you've made your action plan, ask yourself the following question: On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being no at all confident and 10 being totally confident, how confident am I that I can complete my action plan? If your answer is 7 or above, your action plan is probably realistic and reachable. However, if your answer is 6 or below, it's important to take another look at your action plan. Something probably needs to be adjusted. Ask yourself, *what makes me uncertain about accomplishing my action plan? What problems do I foresee?* Then, see if you can either find a solution to the problems you identified or change your action plan to one in which you feel greater confidence.

5. Write Down Your Action Plan - Once you are satisfied with your action plan, write it down. Putting an action plan in writing helps us to remember, keep track of, and accomplish the agreement we have made with ourselves. Keep track of how you are doing. Write down the problems you encounter in carrying out your action plan. Check off activities as you accomplish them. If you made an adjustment in your action plan, make a note of what you did.

At the end of the week, review your action plan. Ask yourself, *am I nearer to accomplishing my goal?, What obstacles or problems, if any, did I encounter?* Taking stock is important. If you are having problems, this is the time to seek solutions.

PROBLEM-SOLVING: A SOLUTION-SEEKING APPROACH

Sometimes you may find that your action plan is not workable. You may encounter unusual circumstances that week and need to give the plan a try for at least another week. Or you may need to make adjustments in your original plan. The following solution seeking approach can help you identify solutions to problems.

- Clearly identify the problem. This is the first and most important step in the solution-seeking approach. It also can be the most difficult step.
- List ideas to solve the problem. Family, friends, and others may be helpful in giving ideas. When you ask for ideas, just listen to each suggestion. It's best not to respond as to why an idea is or isn't likely to work. Just focus on getting the ideas.
- Select one to try. When trying a new idea, give it a fair trial before deciding that it won't work.
- Assess the results. Ask yourself, *how well did what I chose work?* If all went well, congratulate yourself for finding a solution to the identified problem if the first idea didn't work, try another idea. Sometimes an idea just needs fine-tuning. It's important not to give up on an idea JUST because it didn't work the first time.

If you have difficulty finding a solution that works, utilize other resources. Share your problem with family, friends, and professionals and ask them for possible ideas. If you still find that suggested solutions do not work, you may need to accept that the problem is not solvable right now. Remember, just because there doesn't seem to be a workable solution right now doesn't mean that a problem can't be solved later, or that other problems can't be solved in the same way. It may be helpful to go back to the first step and consider if the problem needs to be redefined. For example, a caregiver had thought that her problem was I am tired all of the time.

However, the real problem was the caregiver's beliefs that No one can care for John like I can, and I have to do everything myself. As a result of these beliefs, the caregiver was doing everything herself and getting worn out. When she redefined the problem and focused on changing her beliefs and view of the caregiving situation, she found a workable solution. Sometimes, too, a problem may be easier to work on if you break it down into smaller problems. Most of the time if you follow these steps, you will find a solution that solves the problem. It's important to avoid making the mistake of jumping from step 1 to step 7 and thinking nothing can be done.

SUMMARY OF THE SOLUTION-SEEKING APPROACH

1. Identify the problem.
2. List ideas to solve the problem.
3. Select one idea to try.
4. Assess the results.
5. Substitute another idea if the first one didn't work.
6. Utilize other resources if your solutions don't work.
7. Accept that the problem may not be solvable now.

REWARD YOURSELF

Accomplishing action plans is often a reward in itself. However, it's also important to find healthy pleasures that add enjoyment to your life. Rewards don't have to be fancy or expensive or take a lot of time.

SUMMARY

In review, a caregiver who practices selfcare does the following:

1. Sets goals.
2. Identifies a variety of options for reaching a goal.
3. Makes an action plan toward accomplishing the goal.
4. Carries out the action plan.
5. Assesses how well the action plan is working.
6. Makes adjustments, as necessary, in the action plan.
7. Rewards himself or herself.

Not all goals are achievable. Sometimes we must accept that what we want to do is not possible at this time, and we must let go of the idea. Be realistic about goals and don't dwell on what can't be done. Consider what is likely to happen to the caregiver who is driven by a goal to make her mother happy. Given her mother's personality, this goal may be completely unachievable. Such a goal creates a heavy burden and a caregiver is not likely to achieve it. However, an achievable goal might be to provide a pleasurable activity for her mother at least once a week perhaps taking her to get her hair done, visiting a friend, watching a comedy on television, or working together on a project her mother enjoys. Remember, what is important in caregiving is not just to survive, but to thrive! This course is designed to give you a set of tools to help you take care of yourself. This in turn will help you provide better care.

Going forward, please make every effort to complete a new action plan for that week, or period, and it will be discussed in the weekly live-chat sessions with the Instructor, and with other participants if you choose so.

First Name:

Last Name:

My Action Plan

Institute on Aging: Empower Online

When writing an action plan, be sure it includes:

1. **What** you are going to do
2. **How** much you are going to do
3. **When** you are going to do it (e.g., what time of day)
4. **How** often you are going to do it

Example: This week I will read a favorite book (what) for a half hour (how much) in the mid-afternoon when my spouse sleeps (when), three times – Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (how many).

This week I will:

(What) _____

(How much) _____

(When) _____

(How often) _____

How **confident** are you that you will complete your entire action plan during this week?

1	2	3	4	5
Low Confident	Somewhat Confident	Moderate Confident	Very Confident	Extreme Confident

	Check off each day you carry out your plan	Comments
Monday		
Tuesday		
Wednesday		
Thursday		
Friday		
Saturday		
Sunday		