



# TRY A GOAL- ORIENTED SUMMER

by Abigail Levrini, PhD

**AH, THE LAZY, CAREFREE DAYS OF SUMMER:** barbeques and impulsive eating that lead to weight gain, frequent shopping and vacations that lead to debt, irregular sleep cycles that lead to exhaustion... sounds fun, right? Yes, summer should be fun, but not in that self-destructive sort of way, to the point that you undo all of your hard work from throughout the year only to have to start over in September.

Why not instead use the summer months to accomplish something, whether you continue working on old goals or set new ones? Instead of feeling stressed and depressed come fall, by setting your summer goals now and creating a plan, you will feel much better once the leaves start to change—and you can still enjoy the occasional barbeque as a guilt-free reward for your hard work.

With my adult ADHD clients, I find much of the year is spent on goals related to executive function either in the workplace or at home. Goals linked to time management and organization are the most popular during fall, winter, and spring, when people are under pressure in their workplaces to meet deadlines and children are in school (also under pressure to meet deadlines).





**THEN COMES SUMMER.** For an adult with ADHD, it's a little bit like going from the rigorous routine of boot camp to the free-for-all of spring break in Cancun. Fun, yes, but it can leave you hung over and full of regret. Looking at it from another angle, summer is a perfect two- to three-month time frame to set and reach those goals you aren't able to focus on during the rest of the year. Improving exercise and nutrition, developing good sleep habits, nurturing relationships, spending time on a hobby, improving your financial outlook, or planning for the future are examples of good summer goals.

### Golden rules for goal-setting

The first step toward improving the ability to set and reach goals is to learn how to create an effective goal. In *Succeeding with Adult ADHD: Daily Strategies to Help You Achieve Your Goals and Manage Your Life* (APA, 2012), Dr. Frances Prevatt and I offer the following golden rules for creating an effective goal:

1. Make your goal **measurable**.
2. Make your goal **process-based**.
3. Make your goal **time-sensitive**.

Let's start with the first golden rule. In order to make goals *measurable*, you need to define them in such a way that after a period of time you can produce an evidence-based yes or no answer to the question, "Did you accomplish your goal?" In other words, how will you know whether you have exercised more, eaten better, improved sleep habits, spent time on your hobby, and so forth?

Secondly, making a goal *process-based* ensures you will consistently monitor and focus behavior in a way that will not only help you to achieve the goal, but more importantly, learn to understand your behavior along the way. For example, it is not enough to say that you will run a 5k by the end of the summer if it means you will sit on the couch eating potato chips until the night before the race, and then lay on the couch in pain for weeks afterwards. Instead, focus on the process. What will you do on a weekly and even daily basis to make sure you achieve your goal with quality results?

Finally, make the goal *time-sensitive*. Simply put, you must include a deadline by which time your long-term goal should be accomplished, otherwise it is left out in oblivion to dangle forever and ever. The trick here is to be realistic. Don't think that although you haven't read a book in two years you will be able to read nightly for the next month. People commonly make this mistake when it comes to things like exercise and nutrition as well (an important part of ADHD symptom reduction). If you haven't set foot in the gym for five years, don't aim to run that 5k in three weeks. It's not going to happen. Remember, any amount of

goal-directed behavior you engage in is most likely more than you were doing the week prior, and that is something of which to be proud. A realistic goal may be to get to the gym once a week all summer long, which may not be ideal but is better than not going at all.

If you are a parent, summertime can also be the perfect time to incorporate your children (who may or may not also have ADHD) into your goals, which has the double benefit of teaching your children good habits and bonding with them at the same time. Take swimming lessons with your child, develop a family bedtime ritual, go hiking together every other week, or let kids help plan family vacations. Adults aren't the only ones who feel overwhelmed and disorganized once school gets out, but sending your kids off to a different camp each week doesn't have to be the answer. (Added bonus: These ideas are less expensive than most camps!)

### Breaking goals down into smaller steps

As outlined in *Succeeding with Adult ADHD*, once you have created your goals, the next step is to begin the task of breaking down your goals into smaller, weekly "baby steps." Because a two- or three-month summer goal can seem big and overwhelming, now that it has been recorded, put it aside. Now focus on the very first step you will need to take in order to eventually reach your goal. Think small. Think easy.

For the first few weeks, your job is to set (and complete) objectives that are well within your capabilities. By doing this, you will increase your confidence, enabling you to





Make  
Your Goal  
**Measurable**



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**Process-Based**



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slowly take on more and more challenging objectives. For example, if you created a relationship goal centered on reducing arguments and communicating better with your spouse by summer's end, your first week's objective may be to record what are the current pitfalls in your communication. If you created a goal to exercise more frequently, maybe your first week's objective is to talk to two active friends about athletic activities that they find fun and interesting.

When writing down your weekly objectives, be as specific and detailed as possible. It is not enough to write, "Run two miles." Instead, attempt to specify how, when, where, and what you are going to do: "After work, take twenty minutes to change and stretch.

At 6:30, go for two-mile run from home to the high school and back at an easy pace."

Do not feel you need to work on every summer goal every week. Tackle your top-priority goals first. You may also have more than one objective pertaining to only one goal. Finally, the art of creating weekly objectives that are "not too big and not too small" can be a challenge for anyone. Don't hesitate to enlist the help of a coach, counselor, or friend to help you map out your goal-directed behavior.

Last, but perhaps most important, don't forget to reward yourself for meeting your weekly objectives and your overall summer goals. Relax poolside with a glass of lemonade after swimming several laps to work toward your exercise goal, watch a movie with the family after your vacation planning session, or enjoy a glass of wine on the deck after you and your spouse spend some time practicing "active listening."

For achieving your overall summer goals, indulge in a slightly loftier reward you can look forward to all summer long—one that will help you stay motivated.

Dance the night away at an outdoor concert or have a fun, carefree, relaxing night on the town. After all, fun is what summer is all about, right?! 🎯

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