

Making Life Work

When our life is working we feel a general sense of harmony, comfort, and contentment. It doesn't mean that when our life is working that it is perfect. Perfection in everyday life is not a constant state but a series of magical moments in time.

A life that works is a unique combination of our relationships, work, environment, and satisfaction with self. By choosing to make our life work we open ourselves to the possibility and the probability of experiencing these "magical" moments on a regular basis.

Making life work is a conscious act.

- Acknowledging that life can be good even if it isn't perfect.
- Choosing how we want to live in spite of outside forces.
- Taking responsibility to make it happen!

It sounds simple but it's not easy. Making our life work is one of the hardest things we'll ever do. It also is one of the most rewarding. It is a way of life not a one-time project. If we choose to make our life work it becomes our life work.

What will it take to make your life work? Without thinking of how you can make your wishes come true, list on a piece of paper what you think it would take to make your life work in the areas noted below:

Wish List

Physical Self (examples: stop smoking, exercise regularly, eat healthier)

Social Self (examples: more time with friends or relatives, more romance, more time for recreation)

Emotional Self (examples: be more positive, solve a personal issue, feel happier)

Spiritual Self (examples: identify spiritual beliefs, participate in a spiritual community, meditate)

Intellectual Self (examples: learn French; build a website, publish an article)

Creative Self (examples: learn to paint, keep a journal, build a bookcase)

Working Self (examples: make more money, find a new occupation, start a business)

Community Self (examples: volunteer regularly, budget more money to donate to worthy causes, get involved in community politics)

This is not the time to be realistic. It is an opportunity to fantasize. So many times we find ourselves saying "If only I could... What are your "If Only's?" The next exercise will focus on the "how-to's."

The Next Step

Now that you have your Wish List, it's time to pick where you want to start. Many people will find more than one area of their life that they would like to work better. We would never succeed if we worked on every item on our Wish List at the same time. You can strategically decide which area you want to tackle first.

It's best to set some priorities. Choose one or two wishes whose results can be seen rather soon. Our confidence is increased when we reach a goal. Build confidence now for wishes that are tougher to achieve.

Setting Your Goal

Our wish becomes our goal. When setting a goal, it is important to make it measurable so at the end of a particular period of time, you can state concretely what you will achieve. An example of a measurable goal is: By December 31, 200_, I will have developed five new friendships.

You might want to have a small notebook or journal to document your progress. In the notebook write your goal in measurable terms. It's now time to test your goal. Use the following checklist:

- I will know when I will attain my goal.
- My goal is realistic for me in the time period chosen.
- My goal is challenging but do'able.
- I can reward myself for my achievements as I work towards my goal.

If your goal meets the above criteria, you are ready to take action.

Your Action Plan

In your notebook list the actions you need to accomplish your goal. Your actions should be simple and reflect what you intend to do. These actions or steps should be things that can be done beginning today.

Example: If your life will work better if you were healthier, your wish might be to lower your cholesterol. Your goal would be: I will lower my cholesterol 50 points by December 31, 200_. Your Action Plan might be:

- Keep a food diary for two weeks to see how many grams of fat I am actually eating.
- Lower my fat intake by 5 grams a day until I reach 30 grams a day.
- Pledge to eat only 30 grams of fat each day for five days a week.
- Try a new recipe each week to gradually learn how to make my favorite foods in a low-fat manner.
- Have my cholesterol checked in three months.

For each action, list a target date when the action is to be completed. When you complete an action, note the date completed in your notebook. Remember that each completed action is a step closer to your final goal and to making your life work.

Celebrate Your Success

As you develop your Action Plan, you might want to think of incentives to reward yourself as you complete various steps towards your goal.

Incentives should be meaningful to you. Just as your action steps should not seem overwhelming, your incentives do not need to cost a lot of money or take a lot of time. Begin a list of incentives in your notebook and then match them with an appropriate step towards your goal. If your goal is to increase your friendships, an incentive could be that you will treat yourself

to two tickets for a local community theatre production and take a new friend along to enjoy the performance with you.

Making your life work is a series of steps in the right direction. Sometimes you may find barriers that block these steps.

Meeting the Challenge

If it were easy to set a goal and attain it, we'd all be leading optimal lives. We need to be realistic when it comes to making our lives work. Being realistic means accepting that we will have challenges to overcome even when our goal is something we know will make our life better.

What's Holding You Back?

Now that you have your Action Plan, what could possibly keep you from completing it? Lots, I bet! It is helpful to be proactive and determine the barriers to meeting your goal before you come upon them. Look at your Action Plan and for each step write down what could happen to prevent you from completing it. Barriers might look like this:

Action: Keep a food diary for two weeks to see how many grams of fat I am actually eating.

Barrier: I'll forget to write down everything I eat.

Action: Lower my fat intake by five grams a day until I reach 30 grams a day.

Barrier: I'll go out to dinner and actually increase my fat grams for that day.

Action: Pledge to eat only 30 grams of fat each day for five days a week.

Barrier: I'll find it too hard to eat only 30 grams of fat a day.

What are you Going to Do About It?

Now we're ready for the proactive part. For each barrier, write down what you could do to prevent the barrier from arising. Your list might look like this:

Barrier: I'll forget to write down everything I eat.

Strategy: I'll keep my food diary in my daily planner.

Barrier: I'll find it too hard to eat only 30 grams of fat a day.

Strategy: I'll reduce the fat grams more slowly so that I won't feel too deprived.

Barrier: I'll go out to dinner and actually increase my fat grams for that day.

Strategy: I'll not go out to eat five of the seven days each week.

A Word About Friends and Family

Most of the time the barriers to achieving our goals come from within. Sometimes, however, those around us may sabotage our efforts. The actions or words of well-meaning friends and family members may make it harder for us to achieve our goal.

Again, it's important to be proactive. Look at your Action Plan and think about which steps may be thwarted by those around you. If you're choosing to lower fat intake, who will most likely "forget" and bring you a bag of those cookies you love? If you've decided to make more time for yourself, who will infringe on those precious minutes you have carved out? If you've decided to learn to paint, who will be critical of your early efforts?

The people who care about us are often unaware of the impact of their words and actions. Think proactively about what you can say or do to circumvent their negative influence.

Keeping to the Plan

In order to stay enthusiastic as you work toward your goal, it is important to record your successes as well as the times you were challenged. Take a minute or two at the end of each day to note your progress, ideas you have about additional actions, challenges that you feel are keeping you from your goal, or things you feel that have been particularly helpful. These don't have to be extensive notes. Just a sentence or two will do.

At the end of each month, summarize your progress as follows:

- My successes this month were:
- My challenges this month were:
- I have rewarded my successes by:
- Additional actions for next month:

Accountability

For some of us just the stating of our goal to another person helps us stick to our plan. You may want to go on the quest to make your life work with someone else or a small group of people. Your goals don't have to be the same. You just need to agree that you will support each other as you work towards them.