



By Holley Gerth

'Tis the season for making resolutions, and I am the queen of lofty goals. Around the New Year I start imagining how I will exercise for an hour every morning, bond with my husband every night, and write the most brilliant book ever published within the year. However, three days into the plan, I realize my shiny new ambitions will never be realized. And while all of my good intentions are staring me in the face, I realize something is drastically wrong. Rather than providing much-needed motivation, the goals created to help me live a full, balanced life have instead become the seeds of future disappointment.

One day I was driving to work and telling myself once again, "When things slow down, I will go to the gym and work out all the time. I'll get in shape. It will be great." Then I think, "I've been telling myself this for five years. Things are never going to slow down. I've got to do what I can." That was the beginning of what I like to call "The Do What You Can Plan."

"The Do What You Can Plan" is exactly what it sounds like—you do what you can to achieve your goals. For me, this meant doing whatever little bit of exercise I could each day. If I could only fit in ten sit-ups, that's all I would do. A year later, I'd lost the post-college weight I wanted to shed and dropped a clothing size. I was shocked that I'd actually reached my goal by doing so little. So I decided to start applying "The Do What You Can Plan" to other areas of my life and spend some time figuring out exactly what made it work. Here are a few things I've discovered along the way.

Small Can Be Really Big

We often get caught up in thinking we have to do something really big to achieve our goals, but sometimes the little things really can make a difference. Someone once told me that coming to the point where change happens is like adding one



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drop of water to a bucket every day. One day the bucket just overflows, but it's all the little drops along the way that make it happen. So when you're setting goals and thinking about the steps to reach them, think small. Say tomorrow you make a personal goal to walk a mile every day. If you take your dog for a walk around the block, and that's all you can do for the day-that's great. Over time, those steps will add up and you'll go farther than you imagined.

Easy Is Not a Four-Letter Word

We all lead busy lives. Figuring out how to reach our goals when so many other things are asking for our attention is tough. I confess that I love to make complicated goals that are hard to maintain. The perfectionist in me comes out in full-force, and before I know it, my goals need three notebooks and four spreadsheets just to keep track of them. But the easy way is often the best way. For example, if you are trying to get in shape, think about how you can do that as part of your everyday routine. I do squats when I dry my hair in the morning and while unloading laundry. My husband thinks this is hilarious and the dog shoots me a look of confusion now and then, but it's a small price to pay. Asking yourself how a goal can fit your everyday life is more than easy, it's essential.

The Meaning Matters

If your goal is a good one, it will take more than killer will power to see you through. For me, a goal needs to have deeper meaning. It's not enough to motivate me if all I want to do is fit into a smaller pair of jeans. I want to be fit so that I can have the energy and motivation to love God and those around me. When I don't feel good physically, I'm not a very fun person to be around. I growl, eat way too much chocolate, and in general don't make the world a nicer place to be. Dr. Gary Oliver, the Executive Director of the Center for Relationship Enrichment, says that focusing on growth rather than change can give goals more meaning. Change is outward while growth is inward. By figuring out how your goal fits with something deep inside you, you will be much more motivated to do what you can to accomplish it.

What to Do with Slip-ups and Setbacks

The seemingly evil twins of slip-ups and setbacks always seem to get the best of me when setting goals. I have good intentions, but before I know it, I'm downing the last piece of cheesecake at a party. The "Do What You Can Plan" has two little words to say about slipups and setbacks-"Oh, well." Since this plan is about doing what you can, not achieving perfection, it really doesn't matter if you blow it. Just get up and do what you can tomorrow. Also, slip-ups and setbacks are great opportunities for learning. Think about what you might do differently next time. I



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say “might” because it’s also fine if you decide that cheesecake was delicious and you’re very glad you had it after all.

Sunny Side Up

The “Do What You Can Plan” is all about keeping things positive. It’s a lot friendlier than the “You Tried Again This Year But Failed As Usual” plan. Our brains are wired to respond better to being told what we can do than what we can’t. Just try giving up chocolate for a week and see if you’re not shrieking like a banshee by Wednesday. Rather than figuring out what you’re not going to do, think about what you are going to do instead. For example, next time I throw chocolate to the wind, I’ll splurge on strawberries and pineapple to take its place when I have a craving for something sweet.

Another part of staying sunny is celebrating. I’m trying to get better at savoring accomplishments. I tend to reach a goal and then instantly set out towards a new one. Celebrating can look different for everyone. Maybe you go out to eat at your favorite restaurant, buy some new shoes, take a nap-or all of the above. Celebrating is positive reinforcement, a concept we’re all familiar with. It makes our brains more willing to cooperate next time we set a goal.

The “Do What You Can Plan” is essentially about making goals work for you rather than the other way around. It’s about small changes that make a big difference. It’s about knowing that life is a meaningful journey and every step takes us closer to where we want to go. And along the way, it’s okay to eat chocolate, mess up, and make things as easy as possible. We can all do a lot if we just do a little.