

# A Psychologist's Extremely Practical Guide to Achieving Your Goals

10 research-backed strategies for building a specific future

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Viktor Frankl survived the Holocaust. From his perspective, there was one reason why: He was able to maintain a sense of purpose. As he wrote in his vital memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning*, those in the concentration camps who lost a sense of hope quickly decayed, while those who saw a future beyond their circumstances were able to be much more resilient. In his quest to choose his own way amid the suffering, Frankl referred back to Friedrich Nietzsche, who said, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

Without a specific future to strive for, we can't grow. But as an organizational psychologist who studies how to break free from self-limiting beliefs, I have seen what happens when people commit to a bigger future. They're able to convert their experiences — even painful ones — into learning, growth, and change. Rather than living within narrow confines, they begin embracing uncertainty. Their past stops predicting their personality and behavior, and instead, their future takes the lead.

Let me be clear: No matter what confines you're living within right now, you can achieve incredible things in your life. Here, I'll lay out the 10 key things you should do to commit to in order to achieve the future you dream of.

## 1) Define your future self

Only through imagining a future self with improved skills may we be able to motivate, plan, and execute the honing of skills through deliberate practice. — Dr. Thomas Suddendorf, Dr. Melissa Brinums, and Dr. Kana Imuta

When many people describe themselves, they use phrases like "I'm an introvert" or "I'm not good with people" or "I'm bad at networking." But the worst thing you can do for your future potential is to be definitive about who you are. Your current self is temporary and should be held loosely. What's far more important is your future self.

I've often heard that the number-one regret people have on their deathbed is that they didn't have the courage to be who they wanted to be, and instead, used their lives to try to live up to the expectations of those around them. To avoid that regret, the first step is to define your future self. Ask yourself these questions:

Who do you really want to be?  
What circumstances do you want?  
What attributes and characteristics do you wish to embody?  
What relationships do you want to have?  
What do you want a typical day to look like?  
What do you want to be focused on?  
What do you want to stand for?

It is impossible to live intentionally without a clear future self in mind. You need to see yourself as the person who has already achieved your goal. This doesn't mean you need to pretend to be that person today, but it does mean that you are consistently taking advice from that person and making decisions based on their circumstances instead of your current ones.

## **2) Start gathering all the information you possibly can**

Once you've defined your future self, you need to start gathering information so that you can create a plan to become that person.

About a decade ago, I had a dream of becoming a writer. The “future self” I defined was someone who was making at least six figures so I could provide for my wife and three foster children. I wanted to be writing books with one of the major traditional publishers. I wanted the freedom to work when and where I wanted.

To make that reality possible, I needed some solid advice. How the heck do you become a professional writer? How do you even start trying to get a book deal? To get answers, I started emailing and getting on the phone with literary agents and authors. Over time, I noticed a theme in the responses I was getting, and that was that I couldn't become a professional author without an audience. So I created a plan to start blogging and building an email list with clear goals in mind.

According to the expectancy theory of motivation, you need a clear and compelling outcome, as well as a clear path to achieving that outcome. Without these, you lack motivation and procrastinate. Hope theory argues the same thing: To have hope, you need a goal and a path to achieving that goal.

## **3) Tell everyone about your plan**

Your next step is to begin telling everyone about your goals. This may seem counterintuitive since many people argue you should keep your goals private. So hear me out.

Think about an addict overcoming an addiction. The worst thing the addict could do is to try to push through in solitude. We know that a person is ready to overcome an

addiction when they begin opening up about it. Author Johann Hari said in his TED Talk, “The opposite of addiction is not sobriety, it is human connection.” It takes courage to be open about your goals as well as your failures. And radical candor and honesty are crucial to success.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl quoted Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “Emotion, which is suffering, ceases to be suffering as soon as we form a clear and precise picture of it.” In other words, when you become more open and honest as a person, life becomes far more manageable. You stop needlessly suffering about unfulfilled dreams or former hurts. You move forward.

Being honest means voicing what you truly want for yourself, deep down. If you’re too afraid of what those around you think, then you’re not committed to your dreams. Once you are committed, your thoughts will become words. Your words will become actions. Your actions will become habits. Your habits will become your character and personality, which will produce results.

#### **4) Invest at the level of your future self**

The unconscious will allow us to have only what we believe we deserve. The more we hang on to our negativity and small self-image that results, the less we think we deserve... If we have a small view of ourselves, then what we deserve is poverty. And our unconscious will see to it that we have that actuality... — Dr. David Hawkins

Your comfort zone is made of your subconscious and your current personality. Stepping outside of your comfort zone creates feelings of uncertainty, and often fear. You need to shatter your subconscious limitations with bold actions.

Investing in your future identity is an essential action to take if you’re committed to your goals. You must invest in:

Your future identity: Investing money into your identity allows you to believe it’s possible. It gives you confidence by proving, through your own actions, that you’re serious about change. You’re putting your money where your mouth is.

The late motivational speaker Zig Ziglar would tell a story about a guy named Tom Hartman. Hartman was extremely overweight and depressed, but he learned the importance of self-image, and committed himself to becoming fit. He dropped more than \$700 on two tailor-fitted suits, which for him was a huge and scary investment. The man at the suit store asked who the suits were for. When Tom said “for myself,” the man was surprised, given that they were fitted for a much smaller person.

For Hartman, that investment, along with his bold, vocal, and public proclamation, served as evidence that he was serious. It took 18 months, but Tom lost well over 150 pounds. He became fit, happy, and successful. He did so because he was incredibly

committed to his future self — so committed that he invested in it. (I break this story down even further in my TED Talk).

Your relationships: According to the self-expansion motivation model, humans have a primary need for expansion, which is the desire for greater efficacy. Efficacy refers to obtaining resources that make the attainment of your goals possible. The way you increase your potential efficacy is by creating close relationships, which in turn, increase material and social resources, perspectives, and identities.

Investing in yourself, then, is also about your network of relationships. You are only as good as your network. The more successful you become, the more life becomes about “who” instead of “how.” Start investing in mentorships, networks, coaches, consultants, and employees. You’ll want to expand your efficacy so that you can utilize the resources of many other people to ensure your goals become a reality.

Investing in “relationships” also means focusing on the people you want to help. You’re investing yourself in others. Who do you want to learn from? How can you help and support their goals? Find out what they’re about and what matters to them.

## **5) Eliminate everything that discourages your future self**

If you do not create and control your environment, your environment creates and controls you. — Dr. Marshall Goldsmith

Stepping out of your comfort zone is risky. It involves uncertainty and courage. Given this fact, you need the stability and support of encouraging friends and loved ones. When you tell everyone in your ecosystem about your goals, you’ll quickly see who encourages and who discourages your future self. Those who discourage you from becoming your desired future self are probably not going to help you get there.

Beyond relationships, you need to remove whatever is triggering your current and former selves. Ziglar said, “Your input determines your outlook. Your outlook determines your output, and your output determines your future.” Your “input” is everything coming in: the food you eat; the information you consume; the environment you’re in. If you’re committed to your dreams and goals, you must change your inputs to support your future self. That means strategically tuning out the myriad of distractions and everything else that’s blocking your path.

## **6) Journal about your future self**

In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could to any person; I create myself. — Susan Sontag

I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn. — Anne Frank

I often hear that people don't have time to write in a journal. To me, this is equivalent to saying "I don't have time to have a clear mind" or "I don't have time to resolve my suppressed emotions" or "I don't have time to live intentionally."

Taking 10 to 20 minutes every day, ideally at the start of the day, to express your thoughts and feelings is how you reduce your internal sufferings and make life manageable. There's a lot going on in your world. If you don't give yourself the space to think, reflect, and strategize, then you'll be living reactively. You'll be on autopilot, wandering without purpose.

Journaling allows you to connect with your intentions and clear the internal fog that could keep you stuck. It allows you to write about your dreams, trigger the mindset of your future self, and strategize action items you could do today to move forward. When you're struggling, you should write about that, too. By giving your anxieties form, you'll stop suffering and be able to move forward.

## **7) Define one to three actions you can make daily toward your goal**

There is a fundamental difference between what's urgent and what's important. Put your future self in the "important" category.

The urgency of your life, bills, relationships, and schedule often postpones what is important. It is for this reason that you must prioritize the important. The Pareto principle suggests that 80% of results come from 20% of activities. So 80/20 your life.

When you're focused on your future self, you don't need a big to-do list. Instead, you need a focused and short list. Just one to three items each day. Count your wins. Make meaningful progress. Focus on the most important action, not the easiest one.

## **8) "Eat the frog" every single day**

Eat a live frog first thing in the morning and nothing worse will happen to you the rest of the day. — Mark Twain

When it comes to your to-do list, you need to do the most difficult thing — or in Mark Twain's words, "eat a live frog" — ideally before 8 a.m. The sooner you knock out this task, the better you'll feel about the rest of your day.

Given the Covid-19 situation, we have five kids at home. Our son Kaleb has had a habit of avoiding a few school activities like the plague. When he does this, he stalls on everything else. The day gets long. Eventually, it's time for our other kids to play and Kaleb is left having to slog through his least favorite activities. Recently, though, Kaleb has been learning how to eat the frog. He's been "doing the worst, first." And as a result, his days are moving a lot faster and productively.

Before you do anything else, make progress on the most difficult thing on your list..

## **9) Report your progress daily to your accountability partner**

When performance is measured, performance improves. When performance is measured and reported back, the rate of improvement accelerates. — Pearson's Law

Accountability is crucial to achieving your dreams. I enjoy what I call "one-minute daily accountability," where I send a text message to my accountability partner at the beginning of each day. That text message has three bullets — my "Big 3." These are the three important things I want to accomplish that day. At the end of the day, I send a simple text to my accountability partner, reporting how I did (for example, "1/3" means that I accomplished one of my three goals).

Here's an example of a recent text:

Doing this at the end of the day helps me go to bed with a purpose, so I can wake up motivated and with a plan. It gives me momentum.

## **10) Unplug completely every single day**

Wherever you are, make sure you're there. — Dan Sullivan

Last but not least, you need to fully unplug for large intervals throughout your day. There's a lot of research on psychological detachment from work. True psychological detachment occurs when you completely refrain from work-related activities and thoughts during non-work time.

Research has found that people who psychologically detach from work experience less work-related fatigue and procrastination, greater engagement at work, and greater work-life balance.

"The most creative ideas aren't going to come while sitting in front of your monitor," says Scott Birnbaum, a vice president of Samsung Semiconductor. In one study on creativity, only 16% of respondents reported finding creative insights while at work. Ideas generally came while people were at home or in transport, or during recreational activities. The reason for this is simple. When you're working directly on a task, your mind is tightly focused on the problem at hand. Conversely, when you're not working, your mind loosely wanders.

Put simply, taking time off and actively recovering will help you to have a better mind. The next time you work, you'll have an easier time getting into a flow state. And as you take time off, your brain will actually be solving problems for you.

When you imagine and work toward your future self, you'll see that you can achieve so much more than you once thought was possible. As Sullivan puts it, "The bigger your future, the better your present."