Goal, Plan, Do, Review and Revise: An Executive Function-Informed Goal Achievement Framework

JOB SEARCH FACILITATORS' GUIDE

PREFACE

The development of approaches that explicitly focus on building and supporting executive function skills and core adult capabilities in human service and job search programs largely has grown out of efforts by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University to elevate the important role that adults play in producing breakthrough outcomes for children. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, wanting to advance the development of this framework for helping adults become successful workers and parents, has funded several initiatives aimed at identifying ways in which job search and related human service programs can use executive function and self-regulation principles and concepts to improve outcomes for parents. In that vein, they have provided the funding for the development of this guide for job search facilitators.

In the development of this manual, we have drawn on the work of Richard Guare, neuropsychologist and applied behavioral analyst and Peg Dawson, educational psychologist, authors of the *Smart But Scattered* series, Phil Zelazo, a neuroscientist at the University of Minnesota, Lauren Kenworthy, a neuropsychologist and her colleagues at Children's National Medical Center (Goal, Plan, Do, Check), Sarah Ward and Kristen Jacobsen, speech and language therapists at Cognitive Connections (Ready, Do, Done), Silvia Bunge, a neuroscientist at Berkley, and Gabriele Oettingen, psychology professor at New York University and author of *Rethinking Positive Thinking*.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Recent advances in our understanding of the core capabilities that lead to adult success have encouraged the development of new approaches for organizing and delivering human service programs. Key components of these core capabilities are executive function and self-regulation skills: foundational skills that help us focus, make decisions, set goals, control impulses, make and execute plans and revise and adjust them when necessary. These skills begin developing early in life, but are malleable into adulthood and even into old age.   Living without enough resources to make ends meet can compromise these skills and growing up in highly stressful environments can impact their long-term development. The good news is that we can design our programs to compensate for weak executive function and self-regulation skills and provide opportunities to build them over time through practice, practice and more practice.

This manual takes practical solutions developed by executive function experts for use primarily in schools and adapts them for use in job search and human service programs. We have integrated various approaches into one comprehensive adaptable five-step framework -- Goal, Plan, Do, Review and Revise (GPDRR) that makes explicit the steps that lead to successful goal achievement.

The Purpose of this Guide

This manual provides guidance for group job search instructors and facilitators to integrate the GPDRR framework into exitsting job search assistance programs. This guide is designed to provide infromation on the core elements that contribute to successful goal achievement and concrete ideas for how to use that information to enhance existing programs. It is not intended to replace current curricula. The strategies presented here can be used in small group settings or for individual discussions. Although explicitly designed with group job search programs in mind, all of the information and strategies presented here are relevant for and easily adapted for individual work with program participants.

GPDRR uses evidence on the most effective approaches to goal achievement to create a goal-achievment framework that can be employed in employment and other human service programs, regardless of their structure. In doing so, it provides a set of adaptable strategies and tools to guide participants through a structured process for setting and achieving goals and provides explicit ways in which you can support participants when their foundational skills are weak. By integrating the processes and tools provided here into your job search program, you can help make effective goal-achievement a habit that translates into every aspect of participants' lives as they to embark on a path to the success that they seek.

The GPDRR framework works best when used in its entirety, again and again: set a goal, craft a detailed plan, put the plan into action, review and revise. Each step builds on the last and leads

to the next. For many programs, this process will seem familiar – and it is. What likely will be different is the adherence to an explicit sequence and strategy for appraching each step that may deviate from your current approach. In addition, the direct link we make between each of the steps of the process and the executive function skills that one uses to complete them will provide greater insight into strategies you can employ to increase individuals' chances of succeeding.

Executive function skills are built over time through practice in the settings in which they will be used, but when they are weak, you can modify tasks or the environement and provide additional support to reduce the likelihood that weak skills will get in the way of success. This manual and the activities that accompany it provide suggestions for ways in which you can work to build skills while simultaneoulsy making modifications to tasks and processes to increase the chances of success. We cannot stress enough the importance of estiablishing routines and building practice into your program – executive function skills are built over time and by repeated practice.

GPDRR and SMART Goals

For those programs that currently use SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Limited) goals, GPDRR offers an enhanced approach to goal achievement that is completely compatible with SMART goals. SMART goals focus explicitly on helping individuals to ensure that they have a "good" goal – one that research shows will increase the chances of successfully achieving the goal. GPDRR goes further by focusing explicitly on what happens *after* a goal is set, increasing the chances of success even more, especially for individuals whose foundational skills may be weak or compromised.

The Structure of this Guide

This guide is designed to provide you with: (1) background information that will help you to understand the link between goal achievement and executive function skills, (2) a specific (but adaptable) approach to goal achievement that builds on what we know about the factors that increase the likelihood that individuals will successfully achieve their goals and (3) specific tools that you can use to implement the framework in your program. We have divided the guide into two parts. This part provides an overview of GPDRR and the executive function skills underlying it and then introduces each of its core elements. The companion Activity and Resource Manual provides activities you can use to integrate GPDRR into your job search program and tools for use by program participants, either on their own or with guidance from you.

In **Chapter 2,** we present an overview of the GPDRR framework, an introdution to executive function skills and a desciption of the link between goal achievement and executive function skills. This chapter lays the groundwork for the more detailed practice-oriented information that is presented in the next four chapters.

In chapters 2-5, we describe each part of the GPDRR framework in depth so you can identify the best opportunities within your program to model them and provide opportunities for participants to practice them over and over again.

- **Chapter 3** focuses on helping participants **set meaningful goals** that are challenging but achievable.
- **Chapter 4** delves deeply in how you can help participants use "backward mapping" to **develop actionable plans** that will increase their chances of successfully "doing" the plan.
- **Chapter 5** focuses on strategies you can use to **support program participants as they do their plans** so that weak foundational skills don't get in the way of success.
- **Chapter 6** focuses on the importance of **reviewing and revising goals and plans** on a regular basis and provides strategies for doing so.

Preview: Goal, Plan, Do, Review and Revise

Goal, Plan, Do, Review, and Revise (GPDRR) is a five-step goal achievement framework that, if practiced regularly and with fidelity, will build executive function skills and make setting and achieving goals easier – and more effective. The five steps always happen in the same order:

- **Goal:** Set a goal – something an individual wants to accomplish and is within their reach
- **Plan:** Create a roadmap for how to achieve the goal and identify obstacles and solutions
- **Do:** Put the plan into action
- **Review:** Assess what was achieved and what wasn't; assess the need for change
- **Revise:** Make a new plan, modify an existing goal or set a new goal

Table I.A shows what each of the components look like when they are implemented effectively.

Our hope is that program participants will have the opportunity to practice this routine over and over to set and achieve goals – from smaller, routine goals like shopping for groceries to bigger, long-term goals like getting a job and keeping it or enrolling in school and sticking with it until completion. You can encourage repeated practice by modeling GPDRR in workshops that you facilitate, building guided practice into your workshop sessions and encouraging as much independent practice as possible. Examples of how you can do this are provided in the Activity and Resource Manual.

Table 1.A: What GPDRR Components Look Like When Effective	
Goal	Characteristics of goals that have the greatest chance of success: • Meaningful • Challenging but within reach • Specific *Your role as a facilitator:* • Guide participants to get to a heartfelt, achievable goal • Guide participants to imagine what success looks and feels like
Plan	Characteristics of an effective plan: • Specific (e.g., including date, time, location, etc. and written down) • Broken down into small steps • As simple as possible • Identifies obstacles and solutions for addressing them *Your role as a facilitator:* • Model and teach how to develop an effective plan • Help participants to identify obstacles and solutions • Develop ready-made plans for common tasks • Practice planning as often as possible
Do	Participant skills to successfully put a plan into action: • Remembering what needs to get done • Getting started and sticking with it until its done • Managing time and staying organized • Managing stress • Avoiding distractions and competing demands *Your role as a facilitator:* • Create realistic expectations; build skills whenever possible • Simplify tasks to make them easier • Provide reminders and support participants set reminders for themselves • Anticipate obstacles • Rehearse difficult situations; • Build time for independent practice into program design
Review	Learning by doing requires: • Assessing progress regularly • Identifying achievements • Identifying what could be done differently *Your role as a facilitator:* • Encourage self-reflection • Build in time to regularly assess progress
Revise	Embracing change requires: • Recognizing that abandoning goals and refining plans is a regular and necessary part of the goal achievement process • Flexibility – ability to let go of goals and plans that aren't working *Your role as a facilitator:* • Provide an environment that encourages and supports change • Make changing plans and revising goals routine

CHAPTER 2: THE GPDRR FOUNDATION

GPDRR and Executive Function Skills

Introduction

Executive function skills are at the core of goal achievement. They play a significant role in determining whether we succeed at school, parenting and work. Because goal achievement is effortful work, it places significant demands on our executive function skills. One way to reduce those demands is to create routines – like GPDRR-- that we can use over and over again. Through repeated practice, routines require less and less effort – and they build skills in the process.   Structured job search programs provide an ideal setting for building routines because of the frequency with which staff interact with participants and the opportunities they provide to build, model and practice the skills participants need to succefully achieve their goals. GPDRR can be used in individual interactions with participants, but those don't tend to occur with the same frequency as group job search interactions – the more GPDRR is used, the better.

Executive Function Skills: What They Are and Why They Matter

A growing body of research highlights the important role that executive function skills play in helping adults achieve success in the workplace and at home.[1] They are the skills that help us to carry out day-to-day tasks and achieve life goals that are important and meaningful to us. They are the skills that help us plan,control our responses to things and monitor our actions. They also are the skills that we use to remember important information and follow multi-step

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[1] Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). *Building Core Capabilities for Life: The Science Behind the Skills Adults Need to Succeed in Parenting and the Workplace.* Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

processes or instructions. Executive function skills begin developing in early childhood and their natural development ends at about the mid-20's. However, they can be improved through practice and use throughout adulthood.

This introduction is intended to help you understand the important role that executive function skills play in goal achievement, but you do not need to become an expert on executive function to effectively use GPDRR. By implementing GPDRR, you are encouraging the use of executive function skills, creating an environment that recognizes how easily these skills are taxed, providing support when they are weak, and building them through practice.

What are Executive Function Skills?

While there isn't one standard definition of executive functions, most researchers agree they are a set of cognitive skills that help us organize and manage our resources and set and achieve goals, making them essential skills for adult success. As a starting point for understanding how we could use executive function concepts and principles to enhance the work of job search and other human service programs, we consulted with Dr. Richard Guare, a neuropsychologist and certified behavior analyst who has written numerous books on executive function with his co-author, Peg Dawson. (Guare and Dawson use the term "executive skills" rather than executive function skills in their work. Because we draw so heavily on their work, we often use their terminology in this guide.) Their work draws on years of developing and implementing practical strategies to help children, adolescents and young adults with executive skill weaknesses to successfully set and achieve their goals.

Broadly speaking, the 12 executive skills that are the focus of Guare and Dawson's work (see Table I.A) fall into three broad categories:

- *Planning*. Planning, organization, and time management are a set of related skills that help us to create a roadmap to get from where we are to where we want to go.
- *Self-control.* There are a number of different executive skills that we draw upon to direct our behavior towards the long-term goals we want to achieve. When we lack self-control, we tend to be very present-oriented, focusing only on what is immediately vying for our attention. Individuals with limited resource often are presented-oriented because it takes all of their attentional resources to meet their day-to-day needs.
- *Monitoring*. Regularly assessing our behavior is what allows us to learn from our experiences and to make adjustments if things are not going the way we would like.

One way to better understand executive skills and the important role they play in our adult lives is to complete the executive skills profile to understand your own executive skills strengths and weaknesses – and to consider how you might use such information in your program. You can find an electronic version here (with instructions and a score sheet included) and you can find a paper copy in the Activity and Resource Manual (Chapter 6).

TABLE 2.A Executive Skills Defined

Planning

Planning + Prioritization	**Deciding what steps to take.** The ability to create a road map to reach a goal or to complete a task. It also involves being able to make decisions about what is important to focus on and what is not important.
Organization	**Knowing where I put things.** The ability to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.
Time Management	**Know about how long a task will take and what the deadline is.** The capacity to estimate how much time one has, how to allocate it, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines. It also involves a sense that time is important.

Self-Control

Task Initiation	**Getting started without a delay.** The ability to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient or timely fashion.
Response Inhibition	**Seeing the consequence before I say or do something.** The capacity to think before you act – this ability to resist the urge to say or do something allows us the time to evaluate a situation and how our behavior might impact it.
Emotional Control	**Keeping my cool when frustrated.** The ability to manage emotions in order to achieve goals, complete tasks, or control and direct behavior.
Sustained Attention	**Paying attention, even when I don't feel like it.** The capacity to maintain attention to a situation or task in spite of distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.
Stress Tolerance	**Managing your stress.** The ability to work in stressful situations and to cope with uncertainty, change, and performance demands.
Goal-Directed Persistence	**Sticking with your goal.** The capacity to have a goal, follow through to the completion of that goal, and not be put off or distracted by competing interests.

Monitoring and Self-Reflection

Working Memory	**Remembering what I did and what I need to do.** The ability to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It incorporates the ability to draw on past learning or experience to apply to the situation at hand or to project into the future.
Metacognition	**Evaluating how you're doing.** The ability to stand back and take a bird's eye view of yourself in a situation, to observe how you problem-solve. It also includes self-monitoring and self-evaluative skills (e.g., asking yourself "How am I doing?" or "How did I do?")
Flexibility	**Going with the flow, accepting change.** The ability to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes. It relates to adaptability to changing conditions.

The Relationship between Executive Skills and Goal Achievement

Executive skills are important because they are the skills we need to be future-oriented. Thus, they play a critical role in helping us to set and achieve our goals. Successful goal achievement requires that our behavior be purposeful, which is what makes it effortful. By better understanding the link between executive skills and goal achievement, we can be more directed and more effective in how we deliver services and provide support. As Table I.B shows, the executive skills we use when we are setting or reviewing and revising a goal are different than the skills we use to develop a plan or to put the plan into action. Below, we highlight the executive skills that we draw upon for each component of GPDRR.

- **Goal:** When setting a goal, we use working memory to remember past experiences and metacognition to evaluate those experiences. That's what helps us to come up with goals that are meaningful – we avoid things that we don't like and do more of what motivates us to move forward.
- **Plan:** When developing a plan to achieve a goal, we draw on multiple skills. Our planning and prrioritization skills are what help us to break a goal down into the steps we need to take to get there. We use our organization skills to gather the resources we need to complete a task and to keep them in a place where we can find them when we need them. We use time management skills to help us estimate how long a task will take and to figure out when we will do it. We draw on working memory to identify what else we need to do and to remember all the steps so we can prioritize them.
- **Do:** Executing a plan draws on many executive skills, but they all involve self-control which is what it takes to direct our behavior in a very purposeful way. Task initiation allows us to get started on a task. Time management allows us to wisely use the time we have available. Response inhibition allows us to avoid distractions and stay focused on the task at hand. Sustained attention helps us to stick with a task until it is complete. Goal-directed persistence helps us to complete each step along the way until we've reached our goal and to stick with the goal even when the going gets rough. Stress management helps us to not get too overwhelmed when faced with competing demands and to proactively identify ways to reduce the stress in our lives. Emotional control help us to keep our emotions in check. When we encouter stumbling blocks, it is cognitive flexibility that allows us to problem-solve to keep us on track.
- **Review:** When reviewing our progress towards a goal, we are once again drawing primarily on working memory and metacognition skills which help us to remember what we did (or didn't do) and why and assess what did and ddn't work.
- **Revise:** When revising a goal, we draw on cognitive flexibility as that is the skill that allows us to abandon goals that are too hard or no longer meaningful to us and come up with new goals – or to develop a new plan if the previous one didn't produce the results we had hoped for. We also draw heavily on metacognition because we are digging deeper into what matters to us and using it to plan for the future.

Table 2.B: The Relationship between Executive Skills and Goal Achievement

Executive Skills	
Goal	Metacognition, working memory
Plan	Planning/prioritization, time management, working memory
Do	Task initiation, response inhibition, time management, sustained attention, working memory, flexibility, organization, persistence, stress tolerance, emotional control, cognitive flexibility
Review	Metacognition, working memory
Revise	Flexibility, Metacognition

Context Matters: How Living in Poverty Impacts Executive Skills

Executive skills are influenced by the context in which we live our lives. The impact of poverty on adults' executive skills begins in early childhood and continues into adulthood. Understanding how poverty impacts the development and use of executive skills provides important insights into why goal achievement is so challenging for many job search participants and helps to identify why using an executive-function informed approach to goal setting may lead to better outcomes. Here are four ways in which poverty impacts executive skills:

Exposure to high levels of stress in childhood. Living in poverty during childhood can have profound and lifelong consequences for children. One of the hallmarks of living in poverty as a child is that it exposes children to high levels of stress caused by not having enough to eat, not having a stable place to live, or being exposed to violence, for example. When children experience too much ongoing stress – commonly referred to as toxic stress—it changes their brain architecture which impairs the development of executive function skills. This in turn can have a lifelong impact on their health and economic outcomes as adults.

Living under conditions of scarcity -- the "bandwidth" tax. Even if an individual did not grow up poor, living in poverty as an adult can have a profound impact on their executive function skills, Living without enough resources to make ends meet – under conditions of chronic scarcity— imposes a "bandwidth tax" which reduces the cognitive resources that individuals have available to devote to activities aimed at achieving long-term goals.   Sendil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, authors of *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much,* note that when people live in a state of chronic scarcity, they have a tendency to "tunnel" which causes them to focus on the here

and now. This reduces individuals' capacity to think logically, solve novel problems, and process information. It also diminishes their ability to evaluate options to make high quality decisions and impairs their self-control which can cause them to act impulsively.

Increased exposure to situations that compromise EF skills. Living in poverty also puts individuals at greater risk of experiencing situational factors that work against them exercising the executive functions s/he needs to function at home and in the workplace. Some of these factors include stress, lack of exercise, lack of sleep, lack of social connections and poor nutrition.

Added complexity of accomplishing common adult tasks. Finally, living in poverty places high demands on individuals' executive skills. Limited transportation and child care options, constantly changing work hours and schedules, and complicated processes for obtaining and maintaining public benefits all require highly developed executive function skills. It takes much greater planning, organization and time management skills if you have to get your kids to daycare and yourself to work via public transportation than via a car, for example.

Recognizing the toll poverty takes on adults' executive function and self-regulation skills provides a starting point for redesigning employment and human service programs to achieve better outcomes. There are a number of steps organizations can take to redesign their approach to services delivery including: (1) setting realistic expectations and making tasks easier; (2) changing the environment to reduce the demand on individuals' executive function skills; (3) addressing issues that impair executive functions such as stress, lack of connections and lack of exercise; (4) providing structures and supports that help individuals to set goals, and prioritize how to deploy their attentional resources; and (5) work on explicitly building executive skills by providing regular opportunities to train them, challenge them and practice them in the context in which they will be used. Organizations also can reduce the toll poverty takes on individuals' executive function skills by reducing the amount of scarcity with which individuals must contend. Providing income support and transportation, child care, and housing assistance can all reduce scarcity.

Tools

Executive Skills Profile, Chapter 6, Activity and Resource Manual (hard copy);

Executive Skills Profile, Electronic Version

CHAPTER 2: Goal

Looking to the Future

Introduction

Goal setting is at the heart of many job search and human service programs. It is the process of identifying something we want to achieve so that our actions can be directed to that aim. Setting goals anchors us to the future, building the motivation that gives meaning and purpose to each of the steps we need to take to go from where we are to where we want to go. In short, goals are what give direction to our actions – and to our lives.

Goal setting is a skill that can be taught. There is a lot science behind goal setting that provides important insights into the best approaches for helping program participants set goals so they maximize their chances of successfully achieving them. The approach to goal setting that is laid out here recognizes the important role working memory and metacognition play in setting a goal – these are critical skills that help us to visulaize the future and contrast it with our current situation to figure out what steps we need to take to get to where we want to go and to plan ahead for what might get in the way of our success. It draws heavily on Dr. Gabriele Oettingen's reseach which shows how goals are set matters.[2] Below, we first provide key concepts for effective goal setting and then lay out the key steps involved in goal setting. In the companion Activity and Resource Manual, we provide examples of activities that you can use to model goal setting and encourage the regular practice of goal setting.

Key Concepts for Effective Goal Setting

Setting goals is all about thinking into the future: *What are my hopes and dreams for the future?* Effective goal-setting is a mixture of both science and art. The science tells us the characteristics of goals that we have the greatest chance of achieving: they must be meaningful and achievable. It also provides us with guidance on how to help people get to a goal that has those characteristics. But, every individual is different. Helping people to get to a meaningful goal that is challenging, but feasible is the art of goal setting. It is about figuring out how to help participants look into the future and find something that matters enough to motivate them to put out the effort required to achieve it. If a goal is not personally meaningful to the participant,

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[2] Oettingen, Gabriel, Ph.D., Rethinking Positive Thinking: Inside the New Science of Motivation. New York, New York: Random House. 2014.

they are unlikely to stick with it to the end. When something matters deeply to us, that is what provides the motivation that propels us forward and helps us to stay focused when so many other things are vying for our attention.   Here is a summary of the characteristics of goals that have the greatest chance of being achieved:

- *Meaningful and motivating.* Goals need to be personally meaningful. When we come up with our own goals, we are more likely to be motivated to stick with them to the end. If they are not meaningful to us, we will abandon them when the going gets rough. Building motivation is about looking into the future and thinking about the "why" of the goal – why it matters to me and how I will feel if I accomplish it.
- *Challenging, but feasible.* Effective goals require us to put out more than a usual amount of effort, but they must still be within our reach. If goals are too easy, they are not motivating enough for us to stick with them. If they are too hard, we abandon them out of frustration. It is not unsual for it to take some time to get to a goal that is both challenging and feasible (as well as meaningful). Setting goals – and abandoning some of them along the way—is all a part of self-discovery and a normal part of the process of figuring out where we want to go and what we need to do to get there.
- *Specific.* We are more likely to achieve our goals if they are specific, which means that we have a clear target for which we are aiming. "I want to get a job" is a vague goal. "I want to get a job at a nursing home within 15 minutes of my house by the end of the month" is a specific goal.

Key Steps for Getting to Effective Goal Setting

Research provides the following insight into the most effective strategy for helping individuals to set a meaningful goal that is cahllenging, but feasible.

- *Start with the future.* Employment programs often start the goal setting process by having participants assess their current situation or examine their past experiences. The research on effective goal setting suggests a different approach – start with the future. Start by having participants think about something they want to accomplish -- something that matters to them, is a little bit challenging (not something they would already do automatically) and is feasible for them to complete within a specified time frame.
- *Start with a realistic (short) time frame.* Program participants often are stumped when we ask them what their ideal job is or where they'd like to be five years from now. A more effective strategy is to ask them to set a goal they can accomplish in a much shorter time horizon and within a specific context. For example: What would you like to accomplish by the end of the week?   What would you like to accomplish in this workshop? What would you like to accomplish by the time this program ends in four weeks? You can use the program goals to anchor a participant's goals and the time frame for completing the goals.
- *Start with smaller goals.* Many participants are not immediately ready to identify and take on big goals or they might take on a goal that is too big and fail. One way to get

participants started on a goal achievement path is to start small. In addition to starting with a short timeframe, you can set initial expectations that you know an individual can achieve. This is especially important for tasks that individuals find challenging. If you build up the time participants spend on challenging tasks, you can help participants to achieve some early successes that can prepare them to tackle more challenging or unpleasnt tasks later. For example, instead of asking participants to do 20 hours of job search immediately on their own, you could ask them to apply for just one job each day. You could also begin by doing the applications with them, then have them do one or two on their own. If an application will take a long time to complete, ask participants to spend a specified amount of time on it, not worrying about how much they complete.

- *Visualize the Outcome.* It is not enough for people to simply name a goal – they need to visualize it so they can see it and feel it. Visualizing is imagining that the goal has already been achieved. It is what creates a link between an individual's present reality and their future. It helps to make the goal feel real and builds motivation to achieve it.
- *Write the goal down and/or share it.* Writing a goal down helps to further embed it in our mind and increases the chances we will achieve it. Publicly sharing it further increases our commitment to completing the goal, but people should be invited, not forced to share their goal. As a facilitator, sharing a goal of your own can help participants to recognize that setting goals is something we all do.
- *Display the goal in a prominent place.* You can encourage participants to post their end goal in a prominent place as a reminder of "why." A task that must be achieved to reach the goal may get lost if it doesn't seem that important. One way to increase the salience of a task is to find ways to have participants link each task to the goal for which they are aiming. This can help to build motivation to complete tasks that don't have an immediate payoff or are unpleasant.

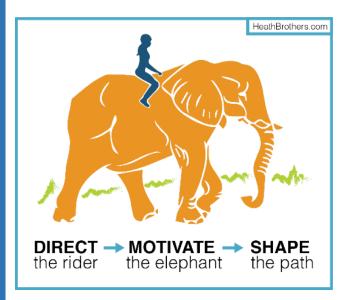*What about SMART Goals?* The concepts and process outlined here are different, but compatible with SMART goals. SMART goals serve as a check to ensure that the goal is a "good" goal. But that is only the first step of an effective goal setting process. Once someone has identified a goal that is challenging, but feasible, they need a plan for HOW they will achieve it. That is the subject of the following chapters.

Keys to Supporting Change

Research has shown that what motivates people is emotion, not information. That's why it is so important to work with program participants to set their own goals and to have them visualize the outcomes. We often flood people with information, but much of it has no meaning because it is not connected to things that matter to them. The Heath brothers, authors of the book *Switch* use the analogy of an elephant and a rider (see the illustration below) to illustrate what it takes to bring about change. The elephant represents emotions and the rider represents information or our rational side. To bring about change, you have to reach both the rider and the elephant – and you also have to clear the path.

The Heath brothers have identified three key elements to successfully bring about change (i.e., make a "switch"):

1. **Direct the rider.**   Change is easier when you know the destination – that's why it is important to help people to identify goals that they care about and are within their reach. It's also important to remember that small steps matter. They are what lead to the end goal. Starting small is better than not starting at all.

2. **Motivate the elephant.** Knowing something isn't enough to bring about change. Feelings are what lead to change. People need to be able to imagine what it will feel like to achieve their goal. The feeling is what makes the prospect of change real and what motivates people to stick with a goal over the long-term – and when the going gets rough.

3. **Shape the path.** The path of disadvantaged parents often is filled with obstacles. Programs can achieve greater success if they smooth the path as much as possible – and provide support to help parents identify detours when they encounter potholes that they think are insurmountable.

HeathBrothers.com

DIRECT → **MOTIVATE** → **SHAPE**
the rider   the elephant   the path

Adapted from:

Heath, Chip and Dan Heath. *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard.* Broadway Books, 2010.

Heathbrothers.com

Tools

From the companion Activity and Resource Manual:
- Worksheet: Set a Goal, Chapter 1
- Worksheet: Goal Storming, Chapter 2

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CHAPTER 3: PLAN

Planning and Prioritization: Details Matter (A Lot)

Introduction

Job search facilitators and case managers can play a major role in providing support over time to help participants become really good planners – a critical executive function skill that is at the core of successful goal achievement. The task of creating a roadmap to reach a goal, making decisions about what is most important, estimating how long each step will take, thinking ahead about what could go wrong requires a lot of effort. We often don't give this critical skill as much attention as it deserves. And, while it might seem like it takes a lot of time, it will be time well spent as a good plan can significantly reduce the demand on a participant's executive function skills thereby increasing the chance that they will follow through with completing the plan. A well-crafted, detailed plan also works as a self-control device as research shows that individuals are much more likely to follow through with a task (which often means ignoring competing demands) if they have written down the details and have thought through how they will respond to obstacles *before* they occur.

Key to helping participants develop strong planning skills is developing a systematic approach to planning and using it over and over again. Participants who experience a repeated process are more likely to use it on their own. Planning draws on several executive function skills, including organization, time management, working memory, and flexibility, all of which are supported in the planning approach outlined in this chapter.

Developing a well-crafted, detailed plan involves three key steps:

1. *Develop a roadmap on how to get from where you are to where you want to go.* The key to developing an effective plan is breaking goals down into smaller, manageable steps that provide a roadmap to get from where we are now to where we want to go.
2. *Make the plan actionable.* In order for a plan to be effective, it needs to be very specific. The roadmap lays out the big picture, but successful implementation of the plan requires laying out the specific details of when, where and how each step will be completed. A detailed, written action plan greatly reduces the demand on executive

function skills, especially working memory. It can also help with task initiation, sustained attention and goal-directed persistence which are critical for effectively "doing" the plan.

3. *Identify potential obstacles and solutions to them.* It is easy for the demands of our day-to-day lives to get in the way of achieving our goals. Thus, planning ahead for obstacles that might get in the way is a key component of planning. When we plan ahead for what we will do when obstacles occur, the plan is already embedded in our minds, making it more likely that we will actually respond in the way we have planned. The approach we have laid out here explicitly links the resolution of barriers to the goals an individual wants to achieve rather than attempting to resolve all of them at once in a vacuum. When programs attempt to help participants resolve all of their barriers, the participant and program staff often become overwhelemed and may not make much progress. Tying barrier resolution directly to helping a participant achieve their goals does two key things: (1) prioritizes the barriers that need to be resolved and (2) provides the motivation for taking steps to resolve them.

Key Tips for Effective Planning

- **Break bigger goals into small manageable steps**. Achieving long-term goals can seem like an impossibility. One way to make them not seem so far off and complicated to achieve is to break them down into small, concrete steps.
- **Identify the resources needed to complete the plan**. Effective plans not only identify the steps that participants need to take, but also identify the resources they need to complete the steps. For example, to apply for subsidized child care, participants usually need a copy of their child's birth certificate.
- **Write plans down**. Individuals are more likely to follow through with plans if they are written down and rehearsed before they are acted upon.
- **Streamline action plans** so they have as few steps as possible -- three steps is ideal, but may not always be feasible.
- **Create ready-made plans for common tasks** to reduce the planning burden on participants. This immediately reduces the cognitive demands on a participant, freeing up limited resources to complete tasks that can help to propel them forward.
- **Help participants to identify obstacles and strategies for overcoming them before the obstacles occur.** If we have thought about obstacles and created a plan for what to do if they occur, we are much more likely to overcome the obstacle. It is much more difficult to develop a strategy for overcoming an obstacle when it is directly in front of you and most likely creating stress for you.
- **The more detailed the better**. Make sure plans address the following:
    - What will I do?
    - When will I do it?
    - Who will I do it with?
    - Where will I do it and how will I get there?

- o What resources will I need to complete the task?
- o What obstacles might I encounter and what can I do to avoid them or address them?
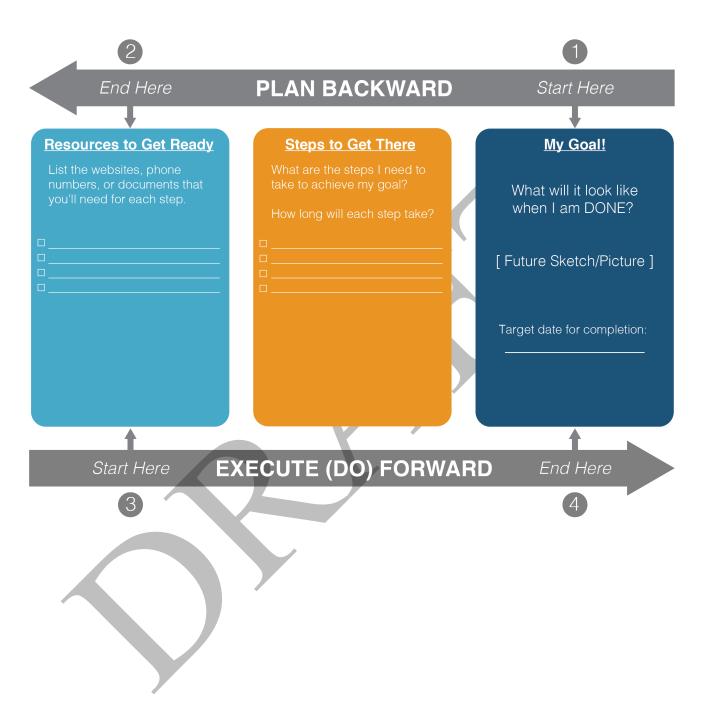
Backward Mapping: A Systematic Approach to Planning

One systematic approach to planning is a process called **backward mapping.**   The process we describe below is a modified version of a three-step process developed by executive function experts Sarah Ward and Kristen Jacobsen which they call "Ready, Do, Done." The process can be used for developing a plan for any goal – no matter how big or how small. The process starts where the last chapter left off – with a goal that is challenging, but feasible.

Create a Roadmap: Plan Backward
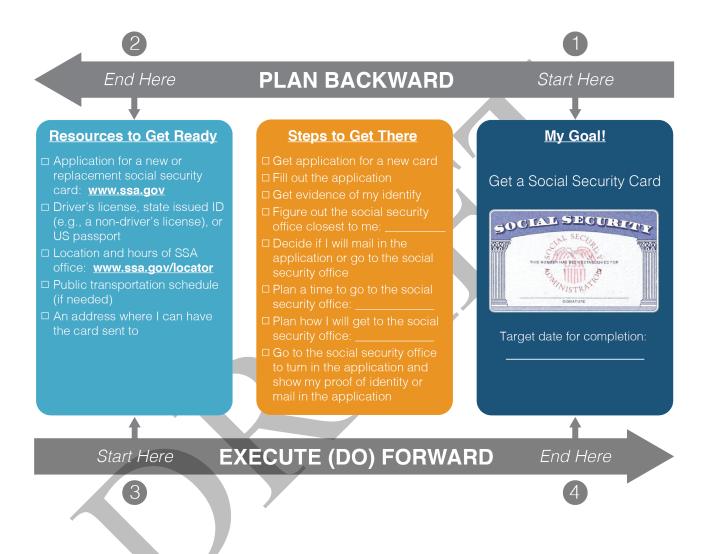
1. Identify and visualize the Goal (My Goal!)
   - Visualize a goal that is challenging but feasible. (The goal might be the end of multi-step process or it can be an interim goal on the path to a longer-tem goal.
   - Identify a target date for completion.)
2. Identify the Steps to Get There
   - This is the core of planning.
   - Many small steps can seem overwhelming, but it is important to start by naming all the steps to achieve the goal. Listing all the steps helps to make the path to success clearer.
3. Gather the Resources to Get Ready
   - Gathering resources ahead of time ensures that the participant is prepared to successfully complete the steps to achieve the goal.

Here is a visual representation of the process:

2

← **PLAN BACKWARD**

End Here · *Start Here*

1

Resources to Get Ready	**Steps to Get There**	**My Goal!**
List the websites, phone numbers, or documents that you'll need for each step.	What are the steps I need to take to achieve my goal?	What will it look like when I am DONE?
	How long will each step take?	
☐ _____	☐ _____	[Future Sketch/Picture]
☐ _____	☐ _____	
☐ _____	☐ _____	
☐ _____	☐ _____	Target date for completion:
		_____

EXECUTE (DO) FORWARD →

Start Here · *End Here*

3

4

Here is an example of using the backward mapping framework to develop a plan for getting a social security card. (There are blank templates and activities to teach backward mapping to participants in the Activities and Resource Manual.)

Example: Obtain a Social Security Card

② End Here ← PLAN BACKWARD → Start Here ①

Resources to Get Ready	Steps to Get There	My Goal!
☐ Application for a new or replacement social security card: **www.ssa.gov** ☐ Driver's license, state issued ID (e.g., a non-driver's license), or US passport ☐ Location and hours of SSA office: **www.ssa.gov/locator** ☐ Public transportation schedule (if needed) ☐ An address where I can have the card sent to	☐ Get application for a new card ☐ Fill out the application ☐ Get evidence of my identify ☐ Figure out the social security office closest to me: _____ ☐ Decide if I will mail in the application or go to the social security office ☐ Plan a time to go to the social security office: _____ ☐ Plan how I will get to the social security office: _____ ☐ Go to the social security office to turn in the application and show my proof of identity or mail in the application	Get a Social Security Card SOCIAL SECURITY Target date for completion: _____

③ Start Here → EXECUTE (DO) FORWARD → End Here ④

Make the Plan Actionable

Making a plan actionable involves creating a detailed action plan for a specified time period.

- *Identify the time period for the plan and select the steps to be completed in that time period.* Long-term goals often involve lots of steps over an extended period. An action plan takes pieces of the broad plan and makes them more specific. You can line up the time period for the action plan with the structure of your program – shorter time frames are better. Time frames should be realistic: longer for some, shorter for those who may be overwhelmed and have not succeeded with previous plans.

- *Be clear about the focus of the action plan.* The action plan may include steps from several simultaneous goals (e.g., arranging child care and transportation) or it can focus on just one goal.
- *Add details:* when you will do it, where you will do it, how you will get there, etc.
- *Make the steps time bound.* (e.g., what steps you will take in the next week)
- *Pay special attention to time management.* Effective time management means not only identifying when a participant will complete a task, but also how long the task will take. Time management is a skill that can be taught and is already a common component of many job search programs. If you teach time management, it might work best if it precedes a workshop on planning.
- *Link actions to end goals.* A task that doesn't seem that important may get lost. One way to increase the salience of a task is to find ways to have participants link each task to the goal for which they are aiming. This can help to build motivation to complete tasks that don't have an immediate payoff or are unpleasant.

Identify Obstacles and Strategies for Addressing Them

 An important part of developing an effective plan is anticipating obstacles and developing contingency plans to address them This puts responding to obstacles on "auto pilot" rather than crisis response. There are multiple ways to develop responses to obstacles. Two examples are:

- *Develop an If-Then plan.* Sometimes we know there are obstacles that might get in our way. When that is the case, it is important to identify what those obstacles are and what a feasible plan is for overcoming them. If we think about a response to an obstacle ahead of time, it is quite likely that the response to the obstacle will happen automatically because we've thought about it ahead of time.
- *Develop and Write Down a Plan B.* There are many reasons why the best-laid plans go awry – kids or family memebers get sick, cars break down, work schedules change. Responding to unanticipated changes requires flexibility. A key strategy for integrating flexibility into a plan is considering what could go wrong and what an alternative plan might look like. If a participant has worked out an alternative plan ahead of time, it will be easier to access when you're frustrated that Plan A didn't work.

An example of an action plan form is inlcuded in the Activities and Resource Manual. You can modify it to fit your needs. If it's possible, you might want to identify what forms you currently use that could be replaced with a detailed action form.

Strategies for Reducing the Planning Burden

Planning requires a lot of effort. As a facilitator, you can reduce the planning burden by doing the following:

- **Develop model plans for common tasks.** There are some tasks that many participants will need to complete to achieve their goals – arranging child care; getting a transportation

stipend; enrolling in a training or GED program; finding a work experience site, etc. You can develop these plans ahead of time so that it requires less effort on the part of participants. When you use the plans with participants, you should always walk them through the plan backwards so that they see and experiencce how the plan was developed. You can personalize the plans by giving participants the options of where to start and filling in the details of when, where and with whom.

- **Make common processes that you control simpler.**   Simplify processes that you control down to as few steps as possible -- 3 steps is ideal. As you develop model plans, you will begin to see which of your processes are the most complex. Those could be ideal candidates for simplification.

- **Reduce the number of steps by completing some steps together.**   Plans with many steps can overwhelm participants so much that they never get started. One way to reduce the number of steps is to complete as many steps as possible with the participants. This will make them feel like they are making progress before they even leave your office. For instance, in the social security card example, you can reduce the number of steps a participant has to take to get a social security card by doing the following: (1) providing the participant with a copy of the application and helping them complete it or having them complete it before they leave the office; (2) identifying the address of the office where they need to submit the application and helping them figure out how they will get there; and (3) helping the participant to come up with a time when they can go to the office to file the application.

How to Model Planning on a Daily Basis with Participants

- Start the day with a backward mapping visual roadmap that includes the goal for the day, the steps that you will take to achieve it and the resources you will use during the workshop to complete the steps.
- Use gestures to physically walk people through the plan to get to the goal, starting by pointing to the goal, then working backwards to show the steps to get there and finally the resources you will use.
- As you begin to execute the plan, continually refer to the visual representation of the plan. For example, as you hand out materials that you will use, point out that these are represented in the resource stage.
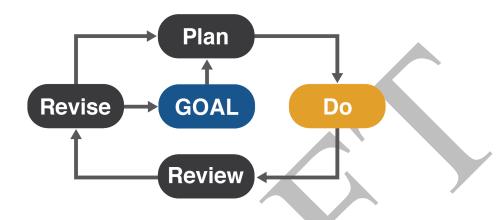

Tools

From the companion Activity and Resource Manual:
- Worksheet: Backward Mapping, Chapter 1
- Worksheet: My Action Plan, Chapters 1 and 3
- Worksheet: My Short-Term Goal Achievement Plan, Chapter 1
- Activity: Backward Mapping, Chapter 3
- Worksheet: My Roapmap, Chapter 3
- Worksheet: Potholes & Detours, Chapter 3
- Practicing GPDRR: Setting Short-Term Achievable Goals, Chapter 3
- Worksheet: Milestones Brainstorming Map, Chapter 3

CHAPTER 4: DO

Put the Plan in Action

Introduction

By helping program participants set goals that are challenging, meaningful and feasible and developing detailed plans to achieve them, you have created a solid foundation for participants to achieve their goals. But, there is more you can do to ensure success as participants execute their plans. The responsibility for "doing" the plan rests primarily with the participant, but you can still help to increase their chances of success. Doing the plan is all about self-control – it is about directing one's behavior to move towards one goals – and that means not getting derailed by all the things that can easily distract us from staying focused on what we are trying to achieve.

Strategies for Supporting Participants as They "Do" Their Plan

Below, we identify additional strategies that you can use to help participants "do" their plan. Some of these strategies aim to provide direct support while participants are doing their plans while others suggest additional ways you can help prepare people to succeed in the "do" phase.

- *Walk through the action plan at the end of the planning session.* It is easy to get caught up in the details of developing a plan. By walking through the plan at the end of the session, you can make sure that the participant is clear about what they need to do and you can take one last opportunity to address any concerns and/or identify strategies to remove barriers that might get in the way. When reviewing the plan, you can check to make sure that the participant has all the resources they need to execute the plan, they know how to get started, the time commitment is reasonable and they feel confident

they can complete the plan. If the participant is unclear about what they need to do and worried that they can't complete the task, they will have a hard time initiating the task.

- *Help participants develop their own reminder system.* If participants are overwhelmed with meeting their day-to-day needs, they may simply forget about tasks that don't have an immediate payoff. Reminders can help to keep unpleasant or tedious tasks on a participant's radar screen. You can help participants with smartphones to set up a reminder system using their electronic devices. For those without smartphones, you can help them develop a pen and paper system, using a combination of a weekly or monthly calendar and daily to-do lists. As a part of helping participants develop a reminder system, you can also encourage them to create a to-do list every evening for the next day. Doing a checklist every evening for the next day helps an individual to know what is coming up so s/he can plan their time accordingly.
- *Provide regular reminders*. In addition to participants' own reminder systems, you can support them by sending reminders – through phone calls, text messages, e-mails or letters. This will reduce the burden on the participant to remember everything they need to do. Sending reminders will also send a signal that you are there to support them as they work to achieve their goals.   It is important to discuss with participants the kinds of reminders that will work best for them.
- *Encourage teamwork.* The lack of social connections takes a toll on a participants' ability to use their executive skills to achieve their goals. Taking an active role in encouraging participants to work in pairs or small groups has many benefits. It can reduce social isolation. It adds a positive dimension (i.e., spending time with someone who is on a similar path) to tasks that might be unpleasant or challenging to complete.   It also provides a built-in positive peer-focused accountability system.
- *Provide opportunities to practice.*   Practice with support can increase participants' confidence about being able to complete a task. One example is to have participants conduct an independent job search one day a week (ideally on a day other than Monday or Friday) during the structured portion of a job search program. For example, in a 4-week job search program, you might dedicate every Thursday to independent job search. You could then use Wednesday to help participants decide the details of where, when and with whom they will conduct their job search and then use Friday to review how they did. Repeating this every week will help participants to anticipate the kind of problems they might encounter when they shift to looking for jobs on their own and to come up with solutions to address them.
- *Model and/or teach effective time management.* Participants have many demands on their time so time management is critical for successfully executing plans. A participant may overestimate how long a task will take which may lead them to never get started. Or, they may have difficulty juggling multiple demands or not see the urgency of completing a specific task. One way to help participants become better at time management is to explicitly model it in everything you do – and to explicitly teach it if you have the time to do so. Modeling means assigning times to tasks that you may do during the day and assessing along the way whether you allocated too much or too little time to the task. There are many strategies for teaching time management but most involve

helping participants come up with a system for keeping track of commitments and appointments that work for them.

- *Help participants develop a system for organizing their job search.* Conducting a job search requires a substantial amount of organization. Without a system in place to keep track of the jobs a participant has applied for and what follow-up actions they need to take, it is easy to lose track of what they've already done and to feel overwhelmed if they can't easily identify what actions they need to take next. You can support participants by providing them with a paper or electronic system for keeping track of job search activities. Most job search programs require participants to turn in a log of their job search activities weekly or monthly. However, these forms often are designed for monitoring purposes rather than for helping participants to manage their job search. Modifications to these forms so that they both track current activity but also identify future follow-up activities may help participants with organizational challenges to better manage their job search.

- *Provide participants with an organizational aid such as a plastic accordion folder that they can use to organize their job search materials and other important documents.* Individuals with weak organizational skills often struggle with keeping track of materials. The advantage of an accordion folder is that it provides an easy way to keep multiple kinds of materials (e.g., master application, resumes, letters of reference and job search logs) organized in one place.

- *Help participants think about their environment to identify what supports them in a positive way and what derails them.*   A large part of successfully doing a plan involves self-control. One way to help participants achieve better self-control is to help them avoid situations that make it difficult for them to exert self-control, including socializing with people who push their buttons or don't support their efforts to achieve their goals. Another is to encourage them to schedule the tasks they most want to get done at the point in the day where they are least likely to be distracted, for example, immediately after dropping kids off at school.

- *Encourage participants to post their goal in a prominent place.* When individuals are struggling to make ends meet, it is easy to lose sight of longer-term goals. One way to keep a focus on those goals is to ask participants to post them in a prominent place. Another is to revisit them in every interaction you have with a participant.

- *Introduce participants to stress management techniques.* Participants who are unemployed and living with inadequate resources are under extreme amounts of stress which hijacks their attentional resources to focus on their goals. One way to help participants increase their chances of being able to focus on their goals is to help them come up with strategies to reduce stress in their lives. Mindfulness, which takes little time, is one effective strategy that can be implemented in job search programs at little to no cost.

- *Provide lots of encouragement and feedback.* Job search is inherently a stressful and often demoralizing task. It involves lots of drudgery, completing one application after the other that ask for the same information or sending out one resume after the other, as well as lots of setbacks. Rejections, or silence, which is often even worse, come far more often than job offers.   Given the nature of job search, it is critical to provide positive

encouragement and feedback as often as possible. Recognition for progress or sticking with a job search after multiple rejections are the kinds of situations that are worthy of positive recognition. If resources allow, financial incentives can be provided, but program participants (many of whom have experienced lots of failure and rejection in their lives) often respond well to being praised for the effort they have put out.

Tools

From the companion Activity and Resource Manual:
- Worksheet: Do the Plan, Chapter 1
- Worksheet: Job Search Tracking, Chapter 4
- Useful Apps to Keep You on Track, Chapter 4
- Worksheet: Weekly Planning Template, Chapter 4

CHAPTER 5: REVIEW and REVISE

Stepping Back, Moving Forward

Introduction

Achieving goals is an iterative process. It is not uncommon for us to set our sights on a goal and then decide it's not the right goal after all. Similarly, our plans don't always work as well as we hoped they would. It is for these very reasons that review and revise are included as explicit steps in the goal achievement process. By including them from the beginning, changes become a regular part of the process and are less likely to be viewed as failures. When we take a step back to review our progress and to think about what worked well and what we could do differently, we are building working memory and metacognition skills which are critical skills for setting goals that are challenging, meaningful and achievable. When we reflect on what we accomplished (or didn't), we develop a better understanding of ourselves which allows us to build on our strengths and develop more effective strategies for overcoming our weaknesses. It is not enough to simply review how we did, we need to use what we learned to keep moving forward towards something that matters deeply to us. The more you encourage participants to review their progress and make changes when needed, the more likely it is to become a process they do regularly on their own.

Review

As a facilitator, the primary role you can play in helping program participants to review their plans is to guide them through a reflective process that helps them to identify what went well and what they could do differently next time. In the process of guiding the reflective conversation, you also want to ask questions that can give you insight into what got in the way so you can provide more targeted support.

Some questions that can help guide that process inlcude the following:
- What did you achieve this week that you are most proud of? What does that tell you about your strengths?
- What did not go as planned? What got in the way?
  - Did you have trouble getting started?

- o Did you feel overwhlemed with what you needed to do? What did you do when you felt overwhelmed?
- o Did you forget what you had planned to do?
- o Did you have too many other things to do?
- o Did some things you did take longer than you anticipated?

Tips for Modeling "Review"
We often don't feel we have the time to pause and review what we are doing as we do, but it is critical to our own growth, and the growth of our clients who learn from watching us. So, set a time to review how things are going. General "review" questions you can use with a client: • *How do you think things are going so far? How are you feeling about the process. (Maybe probe with words like encouraged, discouraged, etc.)* • *How well would you say we're accomplishing what we set out to do? (Maybe probe with some closed questions such as: are we still on track? Is this working for you?)* At the end of a session, it is also a good idea to have a conversation reviewing what you accomplished, asking for feedback on how things went and, if additional sessions will follow, making any changes to the next day's schedule based on how the day went.

Revise

The revise step is critical because it provides an opportunity to use what a participant learned to take the next step. Depending on what you uncover during the review process, the revise step could take one of three paths:

- *Development of updated action steps.* If an individual successfully executed their action plan, you want to help them identify the next steps they need to take to make progress towards successfully achieving their goal. In some cases (e.g., participating in a long-term education or training program), that may simply mean continuing to do what they are currently doing. In other cases, it might mean identifying what the next steps are to continue to make progress. In both cases, you are building off of an existing plan that is working as intended.
- *Development of a new plan.* If an individual wasn't successful in completing their action plan but they want to stick with their current goal, you will want to work with them on the development of a new plan. Do they need to take an alternative approach? Do they

need to break tasks down into even smaller steps? Do they need more support or a different kind of support?

- *Identification of a new goal.* Through the review, a participant may also come to the realization that the goal is too challenging, not meaningful enough to them, or not feasible. In this case, you want to work with them to come up with a new goal, then redo the planning process to develop a new plan and new action steps. A participant may also reach their goal. In that case, you want to encourage them to set a new goal, possibly one that may be a bit more challenging.

Tips for Helping Clients Practice "Revise"

Guide participants by offering the following kinds of ideas and questions:
- *Take a minute to recall your heartfelt goals. As we create and revise plans, we always want to keep our heart and mind on our goal!*
- *Remember, there are many roads that lead to the same desired end. If your first plan doesn't quite get you there, explore other ways to get there.*
- *Given what you've learned along the way, how do you want to adjust your plan? How can I support you in that?*

As a facilitator, you often revise on-the-fly (i.e. you notice something and make a quick adjustment to your plan). You may also protect time to revise your plan at key points, based on what you are discovering. Either way, we suggest that you tell clients what you are revising and why. This is powerful for them to learn from your process. The timing may need to change and the path to get there may change, but that is all part of living in a messy world!

Tools

From the companion Activity and Resource Manual:
- Worksheet: Review + Revise, Chapter 1
- Activity: Construct a Building, Chapter 5
- Activity: Assess a Recent Goal or Plan, Chapter 5

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