

# Planning for success: setting SMART goals for study

## Abstract

This article is aimed at new undergraduate students of midwifery. Health-care programmes are a mix of theory and practice and therefore have unique challenges. Juggling study and practice requirements, as well as your personal life can be daunting. This article provides ideas on how to plan for success through goal setting and time management.

Student midwives have a lot on their plate. They are working shifts, going to university, and trying to have a life too. Often they find themselves working shifts during unsocial hours, negatively affecting their sleep, plus they also have multiple assessments due at a similar time, and all their friends may be going out and they would rather join them. All of which leaves them with a harried and stressed feeling and struggling to perform well enough to survive.

If students solely react to the expectations placed on them, they will find it difficult to manage the different aspects, so the key is to create a plan for success. This article is going to give student midwives instructions on how to plan for their success: they will need to set goals, use time management and be able to prioritize.

## Goal setting

### What is a goal?

According to the Oxford Dictionaries (2010) a goal is:

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*'the object of a person's ambition or effort; an aim or desired result.'*

So what makes a goal different than a wish? A wish is:

*'a desire or hope for something to happen' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2010).*

The difference between these definitions should be clear: a goal is a target, a wish is a hope. Some say a goal is a dream with a deadline and a plan.

As a student midwife you might say: 'my goal is to get through this assessment and finish my next shift.' Or perhaps your goal is to 'survive my training and get a job as a midwife.' Both may be wishes or desires; how do we turn them into a goal, meaning we are targeting our effort to a desired result? It is essential that a person creates goals for the things he or she wants to achieve not simply wish that things work out. Another way of looking at the difference is to consider how an idea can be turned into a goal. An idea is not a goal, a goal is an idea with a plan to achieve it.

If a friend were to say, 'I want to complete a marathon.' On the face of it, it could be a wish or a goal. If they then said that they had never run more than a mile in their life at one go, that they had signed up to run a marathon in 1 month's time, and that they were going to start running tomorrow but needed to go and buy some running shoes first, you might question their ability to be successful in their quest. However, if

they said they had started running a year ago, found that they really enjoyed it, had already done several long runs and believed that signing up for a marathon would give them a tangible target to work towards, it would sound more believable. Additionally, they have created a 6 month running diary/plan that would gradually prepare them to complete a marathon, that they had researched the most appropriate shoes for their running style, had joined a group of runners with a similar goal and fitness level to train with, and researched optimum nutrition for distance running. That sounds like someone who not only has a desire to complete a marathon, they have a plan for success and are motivated.

As a student midwife, are you setting goals or are you just hoping to be successful in your studies and practice? If you are not setting goals and planning successful completion of your goals, you need to start right now. Your life will be less frantic and more gratifying as soon as you do. You will be more successful and have more time for yourself. One of the most common things you will hear regarding goals is that they need to be SMART (Box 1).

### Specific goals

A goal is something specific and unambiguous. The more detailed the goal is the more likely the person will be successful. Recently a young student was frustrated with his lack of achievement, but after taking a brief look at how he was getting

## Box 1. SMART

- The acronym SMART stands for:
- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable/Achievable
- Relevant/ Realistic
- Time-bound.

Source: Love to Know, (2010)

getting things done clearly demonstrated that his lack of success was because of poorly-defined goals. Once he developed more detail and exactly described what he wanted to achieve he was on his way.

If your goal is to lose weight make it specific: how much weight? Do not say 'I want to lose weight', say 'I want to lose a stone', for example.

### Measuring progress

Write down your goals and decide how progress will be made. How will you know you have achieved your goal?

To continue with the example of a weight-loss goal, if the amount of weight to lose to be successful was not specified only a loss of 1 pound would be required; however, this is not really an achievement and might diminish motivation. With a specific goal progress and achievement can be measured.

If the goal is to increase study hours from 1 hour per day to 2 hours per day, the first step would be to document all the time currently used for study and keep track of the totals. On placement, rather than thinking that a large number of skills must be learned to pass the placement, be specific about the ones to be achieved in that shift. Monitor your progress through the list of skills as you complete them over several shifts.

### Achievable or attainable

Goals must be achievable or attainable. Thinking back to the example of running a marathon, someone just beginning to train is not going to be physically able to run a marathon in 1 month's time. A novice runner is likely to take at least 5–6 months to fully prepare to run a marathon.

As a student midwife some skills appear daunting such as undertaking a booking interview with minimum supervision. However, setting a goal of achieving competence in one aspect, such as discussing screening tests and then next time assessing risk, will lead you to be able to undertake the full interview.

### Realistic and relevant

Goals also need to be relevant or realistic. Honestly evaluate what is possible and realistic considering the constraints of your life and schedule. Also ask if it is relevant to your

ultimate goals or desires. For instance, as a student midwife you may not have the time or energy to dedicate yourself to completing a marathon while you are doing your studies and practice; this may be a goal for after you have completed your studies. Although it is a worthy and realistic goal it is not relevant to your ultimate goal of completing your studies and becoming an employed midwife.

### Time-bound goals

The final aspect of setting SMART goals is that they must be time bound. Simply, it is necessary to have a deadline for which the goal must be completed. If the deadline is a long way off, set hallmarks along the way. This will contribute to measuring your success and help you to keep moving toward the ultimate goal.

As a midwifery student a SMART goal

## Box 2. Taking charge of your time

- Assess what needs to be done and estimate how much time to dedicate to each 'need'
- Prioritise the tasks—know what is most important, which need your best energy and what needs to be done first
- Create term (monthly), weekly and daily charts—write in all due dates of assignments, assessments, exams, and block out known shifts and class time. This is easily done as a document on your computer, a spreadsheet is ideal for this task. The goal is to have a visual representation of your days, weeks and the term ahead
- Make templates (week and daily) that can be filled out and printed if you prefer. Your daily planner should be the most detailed and include information such as: classes, shifts, sleeping, meals, study, relaxation, socializing, transportation, exercise, shopping, cleaning. At first this may seem time-consuming and tedious but you will soon see the benefits. The weekly plan does not need to be as detailed, however, if you have an assessment on Friday you will want to have hallmarks through the week that indicate your progress towards the assessment. Hallmarks are steps to achieving your desired outcome
- Consider posting a small dry erase board in your living area that has a list of to-dos; this is easy to maintain and highly visible. Keep it up to date
- Consider your most productive periods—if you are a morning person. saving your written assessment study time for late night is not going to lend itself to you doing your best work. Because of working shifts there will be times where this is unavoidable but do your best to assign the toughest tasks to the strongest part of the day for you
- Concentrate on one thing at a time. Start your study periods with the difficult or boring subjects while you are still fresh and get this chore out of the way to make the rest of the day easier for yourself. Avoid studying in your relaxation areas (e.g. bed or sofa); you do not want to relax, you want to be energized.
- Avoid procrastinating, which is easier said than done. However, if you have well-planned, firm goals you will find it easier to stay on task. This is because you have the steps to completion itemised, therefore, you do not have to think 'how will I do this?' or 'what do I need to complete this?'. Procrastination leads to longer to-do lists, which leads to higher stress levels. Do not put off to later what you can do now.
- Do not be afraid to say 'no'; people understand that you have study and have practice requirements
- Remove distractions; turn off instant messaging, shut down your email, turn the sound off your phone. If you set aside an hour to read ensure it is an uninterrupted hour. It may be useful to consider your time-wasting activities (e.g. TV, Facebook, games) and set limits on your use of them. There is no need to eliminate them; however, it is important to control your use.
- Lastly, before going to bed, do one more thing, it is one less thing to do tomorrow.

Source: University Learning Center (2001)

### Box 3. Examples of schedules

These links are to a site called *Study Guides and Strategies*. Each link has interactive aspects that will guide you to better time management. You are encouraged to work through each:

- Time management [www.studygs.net/timman.htm](http://www.studygs.net/timman.htm)
- Daily schedule [www.studygs.net/schedule/index.htm](http://www.studygs.net/schedule/index.htm)
- Weekly schedule [www.studygs.net/schedule/Weekly.html](http://www.studygs.net/schedule/Weekly.html)
- Priorities [www.studygs.net/schedule/goals.htm](http://www.studygs.net/schedule/goals.htm)
- Creating a to-do list [www.studygs.net/todolist.htm](http://www.studygs.net/todolist.htm)

Source: Study Guides and Strategies (2010)

common to most is completing a large piece of academic work such as a dissertation. This might span a full year of study. Be specific about how much time you can spend on these studies each week. Measure this by setting a word count or a number of reading hours. Take into account other work so that the goals are achievable, make sure that what you do is relevant to the dissertation and do not become distracted by interesting but irrelevant material. Apply the principles of having your goals time bound, with a

completion date a year away set short-term goals to mark your progress towards it. For example, a date to complete the abstract, a date to complete the research, dates to complete each section, etc. Breaking a large goal into a series of smaller ones is always an effective tool.

Although making your goals SMART does take time and thought, once done, you will save yourself considerable time as you move towards achievement of your goals and you will have outlined a path to success.

#### Time management

As a midwifery student time must be split between theory and practice. This is never easy and derails many a student midwife. Once your goals have been set, you will need to consider a time management system that allows you to balance shifts with successful completion of your studies. *Box 2* shows some suggestions on taking charge of your time.

The most important aspect of time management is to use your time efficiently. As a student midwife you have to maintain a tight schedule to keep the balance of academics and practice (*Box 3*). This is very difficult but not impossible.

#### Conclusion

Having read the above you may be thinking that the time needed to create SMART goals and to develop a time management system

### Further information

- Mind Tools (2009) Personal Goal Setting. [www.mindtools.com/page6.html](http://www.mindtools.com/page6.html)
- University Learning Center (2001) Time Management. [www.ulc.psu.edu/studyskills/time\\_management.html](http://www.ulc.psu.edu/studyskills/time_management.html)

is time you do not have. In reality, once you have SMART goals and a time management system in place, you will have created a more efficient way of using the 24 hours of each day and find yourself less stressed and more successful.

Student midwives frequently have simultaneous expectations placed on them that must be achieved in a timely and professional manner. Having a plan in place that guides you to successful completion will remove much stress and anxiety from the process, which will allow you to work in a more concentrated manner.

Start creating your SMART goals today—no time for procrastination! **BJM**

- Love to Know (2010) Business. Examples of SMART Goals and Objectives. [http://business.lovetoknow.com/wiki/Examples\\_of\\_SMART\\_Goals\\_and\\_Objectives](http://business.lovetoknow.com/wiki/Examples_of_SMART_Goals_and_Objectives) (accessed 26 October 2010)
- Oxford Dictionaries Online (2010) English Dictionary and Thesaurus. <http://oxforddictionaries.com> (accessed 26 October 2010)
- Study Guides and Strategies (2010) Index. [www.studygs.net/index.htm](http://www.studygs.net/index.htm) (accessed 26 October 2010)



Student midwives need to find a balance between academic work and clinical practice

### Key points

- Write down your goals and decide how progress will be made.
- For midwifery students a common goal is to complete a large piece of academic work such as a dissertation.
- Set a deadline for when the goal must be completed.
- Student midwives need to maintain a tight schedule to keep the balance between academic work and practice.

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