

Step 1

Identify What You Want

“To accomplish great things, we must not only act,
but also dream; not only plan, but also believe.”

Anatole France

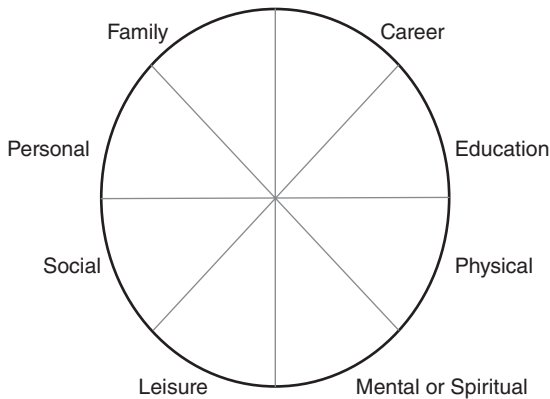
Success is about achieving your goals, so naturally the first step towards your ultimate goal is identifying what you want. If you already know what you want then you can move to Step 2 in the next chapter; otherwise, this step is about reflecting and exploring what you want to achieve and work towards. It's important to keep in mind that this is not a time to think about what is possible or not. This step is about employing your imagination to guide you to your goal, as the initial step. You are just thinking: you are not taking action at the moment.

You may have never asked yourself the question “What do I want?” You may find yourself thinking, “I don't know. I've never really thought about it.” If you want to experience a more fulfilling life, it is helpful to think about what you want from it. Human beings are naturally goal-seeking, and thinking about what we want can bring some benefits, such as:

- You may experience a sense of control and determination over your life as you consider new possibilities.
- Your mind will be occupied with the question “What do I want to achieve?” This invokes a natural problem-solving ability.
- You may experience a sense of anticipation and excitement as you begin thinking about what you want and the changes you may want to make.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT

The problem for many of us is not knowing what we really want. This question can only be answered through a period of self-reflection. It is not important that we answer our questions perfectly, but it is important to attempt to answer them and to clarify them. To help consider what is worthwhile and of value to you, look at the life wheel diagram. It gives examples of some areas in life that may be significant to you. It is only a guide and you may wish to add or remove something on the wheel. For example, replace “career” with “retirement” or add “sporting achievement” or “travel”.



Life wheel

Start by choosing an area in your life that you might like to focus on and begin reflecting and writing a description of what it is you would like to achieve in that, and/or any other, area which interests you. There are no right or wrong choices as much will depend on where you are in your life currently: your age and personal circumstances etc. This stage is very much about exploring in a general way. As you move to the later steps, you can make what you want more focused and specific.

As you consider the different areas in your life, it is helpful to ask yourself some questions to help provoke your thought processes. Here are some general questions that may get you thinking.

- What do you enjoy?
- What do you dislike?
- What are your innate skills?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What are the possibilities?
- Which of those possibilities are the most mouth-watering?
- Which do you like most?

Sometimes, it can also be helpful to consider the things you definitely know you do not want in your life before you consider what you do want.

As you begin to decide what area of your life you wish to focus on, you can begin to make your questions more specific to that area. For example, if you want to focus on your career, you could ask yourself some of the following questions.

- Am I happy with my current career?
- What career would I like to pursue?
- Is further training helpful?
- Is retraining a good idea?
- Do I want to travel in my job?
- Do I want to work abroad?
- What do I really like doing?

Example 1: Identify what you want – Working with animals

Let's say you love animals but are working in a completely unrelated field and are dissatisfied with that part of your life and so want to make a change. You begin to think that you would love to work with animals. You may have a particular animal you prefer. And so you begin to allow yourself to imagine just what your dream occupation and life would be like if you were working with animals.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT

You may want to ask yourself some more questions:

- Would it be as an animal activist or in animal rescue, or what?
- Where would I like to do this?
- Would it be in my home town or in a remote part of the world?
- Alone or with other people?
- Do I want to work for someone else or for myself?
- What would being successful actually look like?
- How much would I earn?

Keep reflecting and exploring and begin to rule out what you don't want to do until you have identified what you really do want to do.

It is important to remember to apply yourself to this step and take time on a regular basis to think about the question. It is often very helpful to write down the questions and answers when you find them. You can also keep a list of ideas, adding to it as more come into your mind. Taking action – in this instance by writing questions, answers and ideas down – demonstrates a commitment to your desire for change. There is no recommended time to take on this step. The key to success at this stage is to identify what you want, feel excited or passionate about it. Do not set yourself a time limit. This step is creating a vision or aspiration; the steps that follow will guide you to achieving it. For the moment, do not spend time thinking about *how* this is going to happen. This is the time for *what* questions. You will begin to know when you are on the right track when you begin to get that sense of anticipation about a particular idea.

Once you have identified what it is you want and desire in your life, you can begin to make it happen by gathering information. When you begin to take action, you begin to experience success, which leads to increased feelings of confidence, which in turn leads to more success.

Case study: Joanna – Discovering what I want

Joanna is struggling with her office job. She is unhappy with her office relationships and beginning to doubt herself and her abilities. She has started to experience increasing anxiety. Joanna came to therapy for help with her anxiety. Like so many people, she is doing a job she does not enjoy and so is not really performing to her abilities. Her feelings of anxiety and depression, owing to work, are affecting her life outside of work.

Joanna isn't sure what she wants to do with her life. She has small children, needs to contribute to the family income and feels "stuck". When Joanna is asked what she would really like to do, she replies that she has always wanted to run her own fitness gym. She can remember being a little girl and thinking that that was what she wanted when she grew up. She had even imagined just what it would be like. She laughs and says she knows that it would never really be possible and that it is just a dream, that it could never happen, that she would never be able to do it.

Solution

By recalling and talking about her childhood dream, she recognises she would still love to own and run her own gym. She allows herself the possibility that maybe her dream could be turned into reality.

By following the steps in this book, Joanna now runs a successful group of small gyms and has done so for the last eight years. She continues to expand her business.

Obstacles to Step 1: Identify What You Want

This first step can often be the hardest. It is the start of the change process. Thinking about future goals can trigger some obstacles to achieving this step.

The following are two common obstacles that provoke anxiety and avoidance:

1. I don't know what I want, even after reflecting and exploring.
2. Thinking about what I want is too much effort.

Unhealthy beliefs are at the root of these obstacles. Earlier, we talked about unhealthy beliefs and their healthy counterparts and how beliefs affect how we think, feel and behave. The next section will look at both of these obstacles separately and identify the types of unhealthy beliefs that underpin them.

Obstacle 1: “I don’t know what I want, even after reflecting and exploring” and how to overcome it

Anxiety about not knowing what you want although you have reflected and explored can stop you even starting this step. The unhealthy belief will take the form of the general following theme.

I must achieve what I have set out to do.

The above attitude will give rise to many offshoot beliefs and specific beliefs, such as:

- I must know what I want to do after I have reflected and explored and if I don’t I couldn’t bear not knowing.
- I must know what I want to do after I have reflected and explored and if I don’t it would be awful.
- I must know what I want to do after reflecting and exploring and if I don’t know what I want after I have explored possibilities it means I am stupid and worthless.

When you demand that you must know what you want even after reflecting and exploring, you will tend to stop yourself beginning the process. Demanding that you must know at the end of this step does not allow for the possibility of not knowing. Holding this belief will disturb you, as it provokes feelings of anxiety. Accepting the possibility that you may not know what you want after spending time considering it will enable you to start and to continue to search for what you do want.



Reality Check

Gravity is a universally accepted law. It applies to everyone. Just jump up: you will eventually fall back down. There is no such law, however, which states that everyone must know what they want after reflecting upon it. If there were, it would mean that everyone would, after a first attempt of reflecting, know what they wanted to do. Of course, many of us will have worked out what we want from life after reflecting on it. But not everyone. Yet all is not lost for those people. After all, not accepting there is a chance you may still not know what you want after reflection doesn't alter the reality that it's still a possibility.



Common Sense

It is perfectly reasonable to want to know what you want to do after reflecting. However, it does not necessarily mean that you must know what you want afterwards. Most of us would certainly start a task with a desire for a positive outcome. However, it doesn't make sense to insist that we absolutely must achieve a positive outcome. Demanding that you must know what you want after reflecting about it does not make sense. Accepting that you may not know what you want after reflecting will enable you to continue your search.



Helpfulness

Holding the belief that you must know what you want to do after reflecting is unhelpful. It would provoke anxiety at the thought of starting to consider what you want. You would begin to have all sorts of thoughts provoked by this belief to persuade yourself not to start looking. Demanding you must know what you want to do after reflecting will sabotage your desire to achieve any goals before you even begin.

Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT)

LFT is a belief that underestimates your ability to cope with an adverse event and is often expressed as: “It is intolerable”, “I can’t cope”, “I can’t stand it” or “It is too hard.”

LFT is linked to a demand, for example: “I must know what I want after reflecting and exploring and if not I couldn’t bear not knowing.” LFT is about effort, difficulty, frustration and anyone who’s triggered into thinking that they cannot stand, tolerate or bear something will have LFT.



Reality Check

There is no truth in the belief that you cannot bear not knowing what you want to do after reflecting and exploring. You will not break if you do not know what you want to do after attempting to discover it. You are able to bear the discomfort of not knowing even though it may not be enjoyable. You will not fall apart.



Common Sense

It is nonsensical to believe that because you do not know what you want, even after exploring the possibilities, you cannot bear the fact that you don’t. It would be true that you would experience discomfort and frustration, but it is also true that you would still be alive, bearing it. In life sometimes it takes many attempts to find what we want to do, and this unhealthy belief will stop any further exploration because it underestimates your resilience to handle the frustration.



Helpfulness

Believing you would not bear it if you did not know what you wanted to do after your reflection is unhelpful. The LFT belief is unhelpful to you: it will not only prevent you from further exploration but also provoke anxiety and avoidant behaviours, making clear identification of your goal far less likely.

Awfulising

Awfulising is an unhealthy/irrational belief that when a demand is not fulfilled the badness is viewed as 100% or more bad (i.e. end-of-the-world bad, nothing else is worse in that moment). It is often expressed as: “It is a disaster”, “It is awful/terrible/horrible”, “It is a catastrophe” or “It is the end of the world.”

When we hold an awfulising belief such as “I must know what I want to do after reflecting and exploring and if I don’t it would be awful”, we can experience feelings of anxiety or a sense of hopelessness, which in extreme forms can lead to depression.



Reality Check

The unhealthy belief that it would be awful if you still didn’t know what you wanted to do after you have finished your reflection is not true. There are many things that are worse. Many of us do not know what we want to do yet and the world still revolves around the sun. We can definitely prove that. And you will still continue to get up, clean your teeth, eat your food and so on: the world will not have ended.



Common Sense

It doesn't make sense to believe that it is awful if you still don't know what you want to do, after you have completed your reflection. It would be true that you may view that as bad or even very bad, but just because it is bad it doesn't follow that it is awful. Viewing something as awful is a nonsensical view to take about badness.



Helpfulness

The third challenge to the awfulising belief is whether it is helpful for you to hold this belief. Holding this belief that it is awful is unhelpful in your discovery of knowing what it is you do want to do. Viewing it as awful mobilises your body into a state of anxiety. In this state, your mind will be preoccupied with questions such as, "What if I have doubts?" and "What if I still don't know?" It prompts avoidance. The most likely outcome will be you not achieving this first simple step that takes you closer to your goal.

Self-damning

Self-damning is an unhealthy/irrational and wholly negative judgement of oneself based on the non-fulfilment of a demand. Often expressed as, "I'm worthless", "I'm not good enough", "I'm a failure" or "I'm stupid" and so on.

Some people will put themselves down if their demands are not met. It means that they only accept themselves if some condition is fulfilled. One of the key factors in self-acceptance is the recognition that we, as human beings, are all worthwhile and may judge or evaluate our behaviours but not the entire self. The fact that you may fail at

STEP 1: IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT

something, in this case achieving “knowing”, does not make you less worthy as a human being. It can be a central factor governing whether you are confident in yourself. When you damn yourself as stupid, weak or worthless, you are globally rating yourself, in essence believing that nothing positive exists about you in that moment.



Reality Check

Believing that you are “stupid and worthless” if you didn’t manage to figure out what you want to do, even after taking time to reflect, is absurd. This generalisation about yourself ignores all your qualities, strengths and abilities. This belief is rigid and dogmatic and does not allow room for change: you have globally rated yourself negatively even though there will be evidence to oppose this belief. We all have strengths and weaknesses. All humans are fallible and fail as well as succeed. It is wrong to rate your worth on not knowing one particular thing in one particular instance: it ignores the many times when you do know the answer.



Common Sense

It makes no sense to globally rate yourself in this dogmatic fashion. When you hold a self-damning belief about not knowing something, it doesn’t make sense to leap into believing “I’m therefore stupid and worthless”. The truth of the matter is that you failed to figure out what you want, even after reflecting. That’s it, no further leaps are required. To damn yourself for not being able to know what you want even after you have spent time exploring does not makes sense.



Helpfulness

Holding the belief “I am stupid and worthless” because you have not found out what it is that you want to do is a self-limiting and unhelpful belief that does not assist you in finding what it is you do want to do. If you hold this self-damning belief you will prevent yourself, in all likelihood, from making any further attempts to find out what you want. All you do is crush your confidence in yourself. Does this, in any way, help you move closer to your goal?

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Case study: Jack – Not knowing what I want

Jack chose a degree without a clear idea of what he wanted to do in his life and having received no particular guidance as to which direction to take. After graduation, he took a personality test, which suggested counselling as a career, but instead he went on to take a graduate job in sales and marketing for a large insurance company. Jack, being fairly extroverted, was good at his job but was not enormously motivated or passionate about it. He was having fun at this stage in his life, with no great ambitions in his current career and knew he would naturally flourish in a big organisation.

He was going on workshops outside of his work hours. He completed courses in anatomy and physiology, sports massage and counselling because he was naturally interested in them. Jack had a few anxieties at work around presentations and procrastination but was able to distract himself and avoid situations that would trigger those uncomfortable feelings. These anxieties influenced what he thought he could do – unhealthy thoughts about himself affected the quality of work he did and what he thought he was capable of.

Time passed. Jack began to feel less happy and knew it was time for a change – but what? One day, while walking to work, he felt very

STEP 1: IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT

depressed and was aware of his self-critical language: “You are an idiot”, “You are rubbish”, “You are not where you should be”, “What a failure” and “You are not doing what you want.” A stranger stopped him in the street and asked, “Are you all right?” It was a shock to Jack; he didn’t think other people could see. He decided to get some help. A friend suggested he took the programme on personal development run at work. This course resonated with him and introduced him to the role that cognitive psychology, emotional responsibility and psychological education play in our lives.

This programme helped him to change his attitude. He no longer experiences bouts of depression and his work has improved. And he has stopped being judgemental – of himself and others.

Before he changed his self-beliefs, Jack held a belief that:

I must know what I want. I’m a failure and stupid.

Solution

Prior to this programme, Jack held the unhealthy self-damning belief “It’s all crap; I am crap”, provoking his depressive feelings. After he had joined the programme, he realised that “if it is to be, then it’s up to me. I can stop the negative self-talk and feel different and do something different.” It was at this time that the anxiety and fear left Jack.

He changed his self-talk and underlying self-belief; he stopped globally rating himself negatively and took responsibility for his thoughts, beliefs and actions.

His healthy belief was:

I prefer to know what I want but I do not have to. I am a fallible and worthwhile human being who has choices.

As he changed his beliefs about himself and the world, a window was beginning to open and he began asking himself, “What do I want?” Jack realised he no longer wanted his current job, although he was happier and performing better. He began to identify what was important to him (it was quite obvious, given his natural interests) and the values he wanted to live by. He looked at what he was doing and noticed the pattern of behaviour. He also remembered the personality test he took after graduation, suggesting he would be well suited to becoming a counsellor. So Jack decided to do more counselling courses, which eventually led to REBT. It resonated with him. He finally knew what he wanted as his mind was no longer preoccupied with negative thoughts and self-damning.

Obstacle 2: “Thinking about what I want is too much effort” and how to overcome it

As mentioned earlier, we tend to disturb ourselves by demanding comfort. When we insist that we should be comfortable at all times, we tend to avoid circumstances that we feel uncomfortable about. In this obstacle, it is the avoidance of the discomfort triggered by the effort of thinking. It is provoked by the general theme that:

Life must be easy, hassle-free and comfortable.

It provokes more specific beliefs about effort, difficulty and ease. For example:

- Thinking about what I want must not be difficult; that would be unbearable.
- Thinking about what I want must be easy for me or else I couldn't tolerate it.
- It must be easy and comfortable for me when I think about what I want; I could not stand it if it wasn't.

These lead to the inability to take this first step to explore what we want. Often we choose to remain as we are: it feels more comfortable. These beliefs trigger anxiety whenever you find things challenging or uncomfortable.

Demanding that you must feel comfortable or that you must find things easy (e.g. thinking, in this case) may lead to avoiding situations or tasks that are challenging. Many of us want comfort and ease at all times, and why not? And yet there are many times in life when we find life and tasks challenging or uncomfortable but do not give up or refuse to do those things. Feeling discomfort and experiencing challenges is part of human existence. Indeed, when we get through the discomfort we tend to experience a sense of satisfaction. The stoic

philosopher Epictetus discussed the concept of control. It is helpful for us to understand what is in our control, for example our thoughts, and what we are not in control of, like the weather, and the experiences that are somewhat in our control, such as driving a car. You may have come across this concept before: Alcoholics Anonymous has enshrined it in its “The Serenity Prayer”, which is based on Epictetus’s philosophy.



Reality Check

Holding the unhealthy belief “Thinking about what I want must be easy for me or else I can’t tolerate it” is not consistent with reality. If it were true then no one would ever struggle with their thoughts if they ever thought about what they wanted. There is no universal law that states we must find thinking about what we want easy and effortless.



Common Sense

It doesn’t make sense to demand that thinking about what you want be easy just because you’d like it to be so. It is understandable that you find thinking challenging. It requires mental effort. This part is true, but it makes no sense to then demand that it be easy.



Helpfulness

To insist that you must be in a state of effortless ease when you think about what you want is unhelpful to you. It provokes anxiety, negative thoughts and avoidance, which ultimately leads to you giving up on the first small step towards attaining your overall goal.

Low Frustration Tolerance (LFT)

LFT is a belief that underestimates your ability to cope with an adverse event and is often expressed as: “It is intolerable”, “I can’t cope”, “I can’t stand it” or “It is too hard.”

This is an LFT belief that “Thinking about what I want must not be difficult, that would be unbearable. Thinking about what I want must be easy for me or else I can’t tolerate it.” It underestimates your ability to cope and would lead to avoidance of the step.



Reality Check

Holding an unhealthy belief that you must find thinking about what you want easy and comfortable and if you don’t then you can’t stand it is not based in reality. You experience difficulties and challenges without falling to pieces. You may not like it. You may find thinking about what you want an effort, and yet it just isn’t true that you can’t stand it.



Common Sense

You may find thinking about what you want an effort and difficult. This is fine. Believing that because it is an effort it is something you can’t stand doesn’t make sense. Although thinking about this is a challenge, it does not follow that it is intolerable or unbearable.



Helpfulness

It doesn’t help you to believe that you can’t tolerate thinking about what you want because it is not easy. Having such an LFT to thinking

about what you want provokes a negative attitude. You may end up doing something that was easy and comfortable in the short term but you would have also given up on your important goal. It leads to short-term comfort and long-term discomfort. Beliefs that support us through things that we find difficult enable long-term goal achievements.

Case study: David – I must be able to do things without effort

David finished university with an average degree after a rather excellent school career. He found schoolwork very easy. After university he took odd low-paid jobs, worked and partied hard. He was dissatisfied with his life but found he could not make the effort to think about what he wanted. He used alcohol to anaesthetise his feelings and bemoaned his lot.

David had LFT to the effort of thinking about change. During school, he was easily the top of his class and very competent at most sports and made the “A” team for most activities. He was well thought of by his teachers, peers and family. Everyone believed that he was destined for “great things”. If something did not come easily to him, he looked to avoid it.

His unhealthy belief was about insisting that all things must come easily to him. For example:

I must always be able to do things without effort. I can't stand it if they don't come easily.

The above belief was a general one that was triggered by anything he found challenging, including thinking about the changes he wished to make.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT

For David, holding unhealthy beliefs of demanding that things must happen without effort continues to support his dysfunctional avoidant behaviours. It is unrealistic to think that things should happen without effort (including thinking) or that things should be easy. There is no evidence to support this belief. It will continue to be unhelpful to him. He believes that thinking about what he should do should be easy for him. He is unprepared to apply himself to making any progress on finding out what he wants in life, while still bemoaning his misfortune.

Solution

For David to begin to change his attitudes and behaviour he will have to repeat consistently and with force and vigour the healthy belief of:

I strongly prefer to do things without effort (including thinking about what I want) but I don't have to. I can stand it if things don't come easily, even though I don't like it.

By repeating this belief while beginning to explore what he may want to do, David will slowly begin to feel more able to engage with change as he develops a high frustration tolerance to making an effort. As David applies his healthy belief to the process of discovering what he wants and finds he can tolerate the challenge of this type of thinking discomfort, he will become increasingly confident with each attempt. The important change will be for David to consider what he wants to do and then writing that down. Without taking any action, nothing will change for David. In David's case he may find it helpful to sit with friends (probably over a couple of beers) and begin exploring ideas with their help before going on to develop these ideas on his own. Building resilience to difficulty and effort increases our confidence and helps us make the necessary steps to successfully complete our goals.

When we set up the College and developed our company, City Minds, we spent many hours exploring what we wanted, how we wanted things to be, threw many ideas around, wrote and rewrote ideas with much debate over coffee and cake before working out our vision for both organisations. At times, we found it quite a struggle, but you just take a short break and get back to it.

Finally, once you have discovered after reflecting and exploring just what it is you want in your life, you are ready to move to the next stage: Step 2 – Gather information.

Exercise

1. Identify the unhealthy beliefs that are sabotaging you identifying what you want.
2. Question the unhealthy beliefs by using the following three checks:
 - Reality check.
 - Common sense.
 - Helpfulness.
3. Write the healthy belief down.
4. Identify the unhelpful excuses that maintain your unhealthy beliefs.
5. Identify the unhelpful behaviours that maintain your unhealthy beliefs.
6. List the benefits of achieving the goal.
7. Identify the helpful behaviours to achieve this step.
8. Mentally rehearse the healthy belief and take action while feeling uncomfortable.
9. Repeat, repeat, and repeat with consistency and force.
10. Take action while feeling uncomfortable.

Tips for Step 1: Identify What You Want

- If you find yourself avoiding the step, check what you are thinking each time you attempt to begin and identify your unhealthy belief. Challenge the unhealthy belief and repeat your healthy preference belief in its place.
- Choose a goal that is important or significant to you. It is important on this first step, as you explore what you want, to choose something that you feel passionate about or that is significant to you.
- Write it down and put reminders in your environment, for example on the fridge door, in your diary or on your screen saver.
- This step is about beginning to aspire towards and to be inspired about something. There is no particular time limit.
- Visualise the goal regularly.

“We are the creative force of our life, and through our own decisions rather than our conditions, if we carefully learn to do certain things, we can accomplish those goals.”

Stephen Covey

