Chapter 2.
Getting Started: Goals for Therapy

Targeting Complaints and Developing Goals

Many times when we don't feel well it can be hard to quickly identify the problems or difficulties that contribute to our situation. Sometimes the number of problems facing us seems endless. Other times, we can identify one particular problem that we would like help with, but that problem seems overwhelming.

Therapy works best when we first identify some of the most important complaints bothering us, and share them with our therapists. This section of the workbook is designed to help you identify current problems facing you, and use these complaints to develop goals for you to work on with your therapist. This process involves 3 basic steps.

1. Identify the complaints.
2. Prioritize and target the complaints most important for you now.
3. Translate these problems into goal statements for you and your therapist to work on together.

Measuring Changes: Rating Scales

There will be many times throughout therapy that you will be asked to identify certain characteristics such as beliefs or feelings with a numerical rating. The importance of the rating scale is to provide a basis of comparison between your initial impressions of the belief, goal, feeling state, or some other characteristic, and a later impression in order to judge whether these aspects have changed. In this chapter you will be asked to define and explain your goals, as well as rate how distressful these problems are to you, and later you and your therapist will revisit and re-rate these goals to determine whether the therapy is helpful. Consider the rating scale to be like a
thermometer, where lower numbers mean less temperature, and higher numbers indicate greater temperature. Throughout this workbook, we will be using a rating scale of 10 points, where low numbers will indicate that you do not have a strong connection to the characteristic, and high number will mean that you are strongly connected to the characteristic. Our rating scale will look like this:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**Identifying complaints or problems**

What problems or difficulties do you want help with in treatment? Try to be specific about what thoughts, feelings, and behavior seem to be most difficult for you in your current situation. Most of us can think of a number of things we want to change! But try to pick the "TOP 3."

Let's go through an example:

Mabel is a 77 year old woman who states that she has had bouts of depression all her life. Mabel lives with her husband of 51 years, and they have three grown children who all live nearby with their families. Mabel reports that she has virtually no contact with her children stating “they blame me for everything and believe that I was a bad mother.” She also reports that she has a difficult relationship with her husband, especially when they disagree about their children's decisions.

Mabel explains that this time her depression began three months ago when she stopped volunteering at the local children's hospital. Mabel states that it was her decision to end this activity when she discovered that her co-volunteers did not have the same values that she held. Mabel was able to identify 3 areas that she would like to change:
**Problem #1:** I would like to find more things to do with my day.

**Problem #2:** I would like to be completely free of depression.

**Problem #3:** I would like to communicate better with my husband and children.

Now focus on your own life and list the "Top 3" problems that you are experiencing now:

**Problem #1**

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

**Problem #2**

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

**Problem #3**

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________
Prioritize and target the most important problems to you

When we explore the problems facing us in some detail, a better understanding of our situation and how we want to think, feel, and act differently often emerges. Let’s return to Mabel to obtain more details about her first problem to help her shape her goals.

**Problem #1**

I no longer spend my days doing things that I like.

a. **In what situations does this occur?**
   - Daily. I am constantly doing things for the house, my husband, or my children. There’s no time left for me, and when there is, I don’t have the energy or the interest.

b. **To what do you attribute the cause of this difficulty?**
   - My depression and the fact that I can’t stop taking care of them!

c. **Has this problem come up before?**
   - √ YES; please continue with section d
   - NO; please go to section e

d. **What have you tried in the past to help you manage this problem? Did these strategies help before? If they did help, why aren’t they helping now?**
   - I tried to volunteer to get me away from the house, but I wasn’t very happy with my coworkers. I feel out of options.

e. **Please circle the number that best describes how much this problem is bothering you now.**

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Notice the additional information we learn about Mabel’s difficulties from these questions. In summary, we learn about how Mabel views her difficulty with finding time for herself and what strategies she has already tried to change her distress. We also learn that on a scale from 1 to 10, Mabel’s distress over not finding time for herself and doing things she likes falls in between "very much a problem" and "couldn't be worse." Let’s take each complaint you have identified one-at-a-time to see what additional information might help you prioritize.

**Problem #1**

a. In what situations does this occur?

b. To what do you attribute the cause of this difficulty?

c. Has this problem come up before? **YES;** please continue with section **d**

**NO;** please go to section **e**

d. What have you tried in the past to help you manage this problem? Did these strategies help before? If they did help, why aren’t they helping now?

e. How much this problem is bothering you now? **Please circle the number**

*that best describes how much this problem is bothering you now.*

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Problem #2

a. In what situations does this occur?

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__________________________________________________________________________

b. To what do you attribute the cause of this difficulty?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

c. Has this problem come up before?  YES; please continue with section d
NO; please go to section e

d. What have you tried in the past to help you manage this problem?  Did
these strategies help before?  If they did help, why aren’t they helping now?

__________________________________________________________________________

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e. To help you begin to prioritize this problem, ask yourself how much this
problem is bothering you now?  Please circle the number that best describes
how much this problem is bothering you now.

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Problem #3

a. In what situations does this occur?

b. To what do you attribute the cause of this difficulty?

c. Has this problem come up before? **YES;** please continue with section d

**NO;** please go to section e

d. What have you tried in the past to help you manage this problem? Did these strategies help before? If they did help, why aren’t they helping now?

e. To help you begin to prioritize this problem, ask yourself how much this problem is bothering you now? **Please circle the number that best describes how much this problem is bothering you now.**

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**Translating Problems into Goals**

How do we shape these target complaints into goals for therapy? First, don’t try to do it on your own. Your therapist needs to be included in this process. Therapists can provide effective feedback in helping shape your goals by: a.) asking key questions that hadn’t occurred to you, b.) breaking down large target complaints into smaller separate ones, c.) helping break down goals into
manageable steps, and d.) reminding you of limitations of time, money, material, or skills that may interfere with your goals.

**The language and properties of goals**

The difference between a target complaint and a goal is that a goal is a well defined plan of change (whether focusing on behaviors or beliefs) that is: important, time-limited, specific, realistic, positive, and measurable. Each of these properties are defined below and illustrated through Mabel's desire to increase time for herself and the things she enjoys.

*Important:* Your goal must be a priority for you or else you will not have the motivation to work on it. **Mabel's goal was very important to her. She believed that unless she started treating herself better she would not be an active member of her family.**

*Time-limited:* As you know, cognitive-behavioral therapy is a short-term treatment, therefore, the goals you set must be manageable within the time allowed. **The therapist explained to Mabel that brief, cognitive-behavioral therapy has been shown to be quite effective in helping people organize their time and introduce pleasant activities.**

*Specific:* If a goal is too complicated, or depends on too many components and regulations in order to be met, it is not a good recipe for success. It is always recommended that goals be straightforward and be targeted to a definite area of your life. **Mabel's desire to introduce new hobbies or pick up old ones is a very specific goal.**

*Realistic:* A goal must be something that you *can* do independently. **Mabel is the only one who will be ultimately responsible for making these changes. She will not be able (nor does she need) to rely on others to either give her time during the day or provide her with hobbies.**

*Positive:* Often, when people are depressed, they phrase their needs in terms of losses or negatives. Stating your goal with positive language will help
you begin to understand how you can be in control of the changes that you want to make. Mabel has presented a negative state of being such as "not having any time for myself," and she has restated it in terms of what she wants to gain and how she wants to take an active role in these changes.

*Measurable:* In order for you to recognize changes in your goals, it is important that the stated goal can be assigned a value along the 10-point scale to be used later in comparing the status of your complaint at the beginning of treatment to different times throughout therapy. The same rating scale will be provided at these times. Aside from measuring change, the comparison of these values can initiate the discussion between you and your therapist about which strategies have been helpful to making change, or if little change has been seen, what new strategies can be introduced to enhance improvement. Remember that Mabel rated the strength of her distress over this issue as an "8," which is quite high. This value will be compared to her perceptions of this issue at both the midpoint and the end of therapy.

Let's return to Mabel to see how her complaints are translated into a clear goal.
Goal # 1  
*To increase pleasant activities in my day.*

1. Is your goal:
   - [ ] Important to you?  
   - [ ] Specific?  
   - [ ] Positive?
   - [ ] Time-limited?  
   - [ ] Realistic?  
   - [ ] Measurable?

2. How could you or someone else determine whether this goal has been met or not at the end of treatment? Please specify some concrete behaviors or concrete events which might be used as criteria that the goal has been met.
   
a. If treatment is a success in regard to this goal, I will probably:

   Have consistent, scheduled time for both my household responsibilities and fun activities. I will probably feel less depressed and less trapped in my home.

b. If treatment is partially successful, I will probably:

   Have inconsistent (less planned) time for myself. I will probably still have strong moments of sadness about not being in control of my day.

c. If the goal is not met at all, I will probably:

   Nothing will change, and I will still be depressed.
Now, translate your 3 problems into goals keeping in mind the properties discussed earlier. Is it important, time-limited, specific, realistic, positive, and measurable.

**Goal #1**

1. Is your goal:
   - [ ] Important to you?
   - [ ] Specific?
   - [ ] Positive?
   - [ ] Time-limited?
   - [ ] Realistic?
   - [ ] Measurable?

2. How could you or someone else determine whether this goal has been met or not at the end of treatment? Please specify some concrete behaviors or specific events which might be used as criteria that the goal has been met.
   a. If treatment is a success in regard to this goal, I will probably:

   ______________________________________________________________
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   b. If treatment is partially successful, I will probably:

   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
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   c. If the goal is not met at all, I will probably:

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   ______________________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________________
Goal #2

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

1. Is your goal:
   □ Important to you?  □ Specific?  □ Positive?
   □ Time-limited?  □ Realistic?  □ Measurable?

2. How could you or someone else determine whether this goal has been met or not at the end of treatment? Please specify some concrete behaviors or specific events which might be used as criteria that the goal has been met.
   a. If treatment is a success in regard to this goal, I will probably:

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b. If treatment is partially successful, I will probably:

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c. If the goal is not met at all, I will probably:

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Goal #3

1. Is your goal:
   - [ ] Important to you?
   - [ ] Specific?
   - [ ] Positive?
   - [ ] Time-limited?
   - [ ] Realistic?
   - [ ] Measurable?

2. How could you or someone else determine whether this goal has been met or not at the end of treatment? Please specify some concrete behaviors or specific events which might be used as criteria that the goal has been met.
   a. If treatment is a success in regard to this goal, I will probably:

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   b. If treatment is partially successful, I will probably:

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   c. If the goal is not met at all, I will probably:

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   _______________________________________________________
   _______________________________________________________
Successive Approximation

When considering progress on the goals you developed in therapy, remember to avoid thinking in extremes. If you haven't accomplished everything that you wanted or reached your goals as quickly as you had hoped, it doesn't mean that you accomplished "nothing." Any step that takes you closer toward the change you want, is a step of positive change and progress. So, remind yourself that change does not happen right away, by just taking the first step. If this was the case, you would have done it a long time ago.

In addition, progress on the goals we set rarely occurs at a steady pace, or in a continuous direction, like smooth curve:

Rather, it is difficult to learn a new way of thinking and new behaviors that we have seldom or never tried out before. And, some days making the effort and showing progress is easier than others. Just as importantly, encourage yourself to recognize and then reward yourself for each step you make toward
achieving your goal. Remind yourself of the old saying, "you have to crawl before you can walk, and you have to walk before you can run." So when reviewing the progress of your goals, remember most change happens with setbacks in between, and looks more like the “saw toothed” curve below:

What does this all mean? Be prepared for "two steps forward and one step back" when looking at your progress. Try to evaluate progress on your goals in light of this principle. There will be times, especially when you are experiencing a lot of stress, that you may begin to fall back on your old way of thinking or doing things. But, this doesn't wipe out all the successes you have had up to that point, it doesn't mean you haven't made progress, and it certainly doesn't mean you cannot change the thinking or behavior right then or the next time it happens!

Evaluating the Overall Experience

Often we judge our progress by the direction we happen to be going rather than what we have accomplished overall. For example, let’s say your goal is to lose 10 pounds. At the end of six weeks, you may have lost 6 pounds. How would you feel about that? You might rate yourself high on a scale from 1 to 10. Two weeks later, you lose 2 more pounds and continue to rate your mood highly. Yet, during week nine, you gain a pound. How would you feel then? It is likely that you may rate your mood lower at this time. Why? We think it has to do with what we focus on when we rate our progress. It is very common to focus our
mood or evaluation of our progress on the most recent outcome. Instead, spend your time reflecting on the \textit{overall} gains you have made: you will see that you are much closer to your goals than when you started!
Summary and Review

What were the key points brought up in this chapter?

1. 

2. 

3. 

What skills did I learn?

1. 

2. 

3. 

What assignments might help me practice these skills?

1. 

2. 

3. 
Additional thoughts or questions I have about this material.