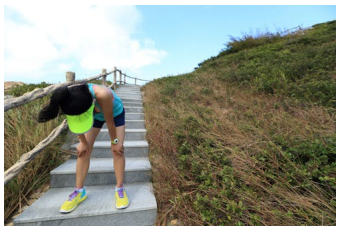

Exercise practitioners and personal trainers are taught to help us set goals.from shutterstock.com

Encouraging people to meet specific fitness goals when they are new to exercising can be ineffective. In fact, it may even make it harder to become active, according to an editorial published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine.

Does this sound familiar?

Every time I join a gym, I get pressured into writing down a goal, when I just want to exercise a few times a week. And I often feel like a failure if I'm no closer to my goal after a few months, so I stop going altogether.

This is the experience a friend shared with me after I told her about our latest paper. And it makes sense. Exercise practitioners and personal trainers are taught to help us set goals, and often we try setting our own exercise goals - such as New Years' resolutions.

But what if the way we set these goals isn't actually that helpful, or worse, makes it harder for us to become more active?

Why do we set specific goals?

Specific, challenging goals are widely accepted and recommended as being most effective for increasing performance, based on over 50 years of research . This is why a personal trainer may encourage us to set a goal like losing 5kg over the next 12 weeks by committing to a program including at least three visits to the gym per week.

Indeed, peak exercise bodies, such as the American College of Sports Medicine, advise

practitioners
that in order to be effective, goals need to follow the SMART principle. This means they should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound.

Even the World Health Organisation guidelines include specific targets for physical activity, such as participating in at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity throughout the week.

Read more: ***do we really need to do five times as much exercise as we’ve been told?***

However, important aspects of the theory around goal setting seem to have been oversimplified, overlooked, or misunderstood
. Specific goals are often used in a one-size-fits-all manner, where it is assumed they are equally effective for people of different skill levels.

If we're already skilled, or in this case physically active, then specific goals are great for getting more out of ourselves. Alternatively, if the task isn't complex - like simply trying to increase a daily step count - then specific goals can work well.

Yet increasing and maintaining physical activity long term is a complex process, so this issue is very relevant for our attempts to exercise and get fit. The theory also states that when we're in the early stages of learning new, complex tasks, specific goals aren't as effective as goals such as to do your best – and could even be
harmful
to our attempts. Just imagine being set a specific goal to cycle 100 metres the very first time you get on a bike.

See how active you can be

Problems with the current approach of setting goals include focusing on immediate or short-term outcomes (like losing 1kg this week), diverting attention away from strategy development (aiming to get through a 20 minute run rather than understanding how to pace yourself), and inhibiting learning (achieving less knowledge of how to exercise appropriately).

Specific goals may be off-putting if we believe they're unrealistic, hence the Achievable and Realistic in SMART. So we might even think "I won't be able to achieve 150 minutes of physical activity this week - why bother trying?"

Read more: ***In terms of exercise, is walking enough?***

Specific goals also introduce the possibility of failure, which is a negative feeling and can be extremely demotivating. For example, you could think:

I wanted to run for half an hour but only managed 15 minutes – I'm so bad at this!

In this way, specific goals can distract you from your achievements:

I ran for 15 minutes today even though I was busy – that's not bad.

Instead of automatically relying on specific, challenging targets when we're trying to become more active, we need to re-think how we set goals, and look at other options. According to the theory and based on promising results from initial studies, open goals like "see how active you can be" seem to be a great way to start.

After that, you could focus on beating what you achieved last time, and on incremental improvements rather than lofty goals planned in advance.

You can also focus on developing strategies for becoming more active, like trying out different times and days when you can make it to the gym, or different pieces of gym equipment. And you can focus on the process of learning how to be active, like learning how to pace yourself if you go for a run.

By simply changing how your goals are phrased, it might become easier to get active, and stay active for longer.

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