

Extension Education
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Perfectionism – The Goal Killer By Tasha Killian

The end of the year is always a time to reflect on what happened during the year and set goals for what we want to do in the next year. For me, it is always easy to set these goals, and even easier to get them started, but I, like most people, struggle with actually completing them. In fact, according to Business Insider, a measly 9.2% of people actually follow through on their resolutions and don't give up. I decided I wanted to be a part of that 9.2% this year, so I searched for ways to do that. What I found was a book titled "Finish: Give Yourself the Gift of Done" by Jon Acuff.

Acuff gives some really good tips on how to finish your goals. He goes through the psychology behind why goals fail and he discusses how we can make sure the way we set goals helps us not just write them down and get them started, but complete them. Acuff talks about how we emphasize the first day we start the goal when we should actually be emphasizing a different day, the day that matters most – the day after perfect. He goes on to talk about how perfectionism keeps us from keeping on track with our goals because psychology mixed with culture tells us that if we mess up once, we might as well just give up. He uses the example of running long distances. He says in two months he ran 200 miles, but in the third just 10, in the fourth only 8. The reason behind that is that we tend to give up if we can't reach perfection. We tend to stop our goals if we mess up a little. That is why the most important day in a goal is not the first or the last, it is the day after perfect. How you react when you mess up on your goal, what you do on that first day after perfect, is what determines if you will finish.

Sometimes, this attitude even keeps us from starting our goals. Have you ever decided not to do something because you thought you would fail? How about keeping yourself from writing down or sharing an idea because you were afraid of it failing? We've all been there. It's wired in our brains and is a part of our culture, that if we aren't 100% perfect at something, we shouldn't even try, because, why try if you know you will fail, right? Wrong. Wrong because you will fail. Failing is inevitable. The secret is learning to accept that and keep moving forward, because finishing your goal is more important than quitting because you weren't perfect. So, how do we combat that attitude? How do we learn to tolerate the imperfections so that when that day after perfect comes we won't feel like our goals are a lost cause? The trick is to set the right goal, and to get there the right way.

In his book, Acuff suggests taking a goal and cutting it in half. That sounds counterintuitive, right? If I want to accomplish a goal, why am I suddenly going to be doing less? You are going to be doing less because doing less will help you be able to do more. Oftentimes, when we set our goals, we set this audacious number, that yes, although they may be obtainable, are still big and ambitious. The problem with that though, is that when you set a big and ambitious goal, you also set more room for failing. If failing becomes easier, than the day after perfect will come more readily, and probably more frequently. Let's use the example of losing weight, because it's a fairly common goal and easy to use when explaining this concept. Let's say my goal is to lose 30 pounds in 3 months. That's a smart goal, right? After all, it's only about

2.5 pounds each week. Well, what happens if in the third week, I only lose 1 pound. That means my whole goal is thrown off and I should just give up, right? Think about what would happen if the goal was instead, losing 30 pounds in 6 months, or 15 pounds in 3 months. Now, the weekly number is more attainable. That means that if I mess up one week, if my goal isn't perfectly on track, it is easier for me to accept and to keep going. If you want to be a goal finisher instead of a goal setter, try cutting the goal in half.

The next trick is to make sure you are on the right path. Acuff says, "even if you pursue the right goal in the wrong way, you will still end up in the wrong place." Think about that in terms of our goal of losing 30 pounds in 6 months. If I decide the way I want to go about doing that is to run every day, but I hate running, chances are I am not going to finish that goal. Same if I decide that I am only going to eat salads, but hate the way salads taste. Why? I did it in the wrong way. Another way to combat perfectionism when we set goals is to enjoy the goals we are setting. That may sound groundbreaking, but goals should be fun! You should enjoy what you are doing to get to where you want to be. This may take some trial and error, but remember your path to finishing won't be perfect, so it's okay to experiment. Also, going about finishing a goal in the wrong way will still get you to the wrong place. When you set your goal and plan for how to accomplish it, remember to keep the fun in it. Keeping your goal fun will help you when that most important day comes – the day after perfect, because you will like what you are doing and enjoy it.

Setting goals is easy. We can all think of things we can do or want to do to improve our lives or check off our bucket list. Finishing them is where we struggle. Keep these tips in mind as you look forward to the next year. See what happens and what you can do when you cut your goals in half and go about them the right way. Accepting and tolerating the fact that you won't be perfect in your goals is the key to finishing them. I plan on trying these tips myself and hopefully, if you do this too, the new year may very well be the best one yet.