

 Mindset Intervention n/a Client No

## Building Self-Efficacy by Taking Small Steps

Considering behavior change, engaging in new and different behaviors helps people realize that they can carry out these behaviors successfully. This has been referred to as self-efficacy, defined as the belief that one can carry out what is necessary to realize one's goals (Bandura, 1997). Through a self-fulfilling cycle of achievement and confidence, self-efficacy can develop over time. In general, people who have high self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to be committed to their goals (Bandura, 1997; Gollwitzer, 1990).

Research also shows that initiating a behavioral change successfully has a positive effect on the brain. According to Histed, Pasupathy, and Miller (2009), people learn more from their successes than from their failures, and subsequent achievements are processed more efficiently. In other words, our brains learn quickly what makes us succeed so that we can repeat it.

In sum, through a self-fulfilling cycle of achievement and confidence, our brains can learn that our success and self-efficacy can develop over time. However, for this cycle to emerge, one must take the first step. Many people fail to enter this positive spiral of learning and building confidence because they focus on steps that are too big; they want to change too many things at once or try to make drastic changes in a short time. Often it takes only a small change to get things moving in a positive direction. Goals that are specific, not too difficult, and short-term usually lead to higher self-efficacy (Yailagh, Lloyd, & Walsh, 2009). This tool was designed for clients to initiate effective goal pursuit by taking small steps.



### Author

This tool was created by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



### Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients move closer to their goals by taking small steps. In this way, clients can enter a positive spiral of success and growing self-efficacy.



## Advice

- Encourage clients to be persistent by informing them that habits do not start feeling “automatic” until they are done regularly for a while. Before a habit is automatic, clients will have to use willpower, which, like a muscle, can get fatigued yet can strengthen with the use over time.
- Practitioners may ask clients to bring their pathway to change worksheet to the sessions so that clients can discuss progress and self-reflect together with the practitioner.
- Ensure that whatever clients intend to change is reasonable and achievable. This way, the chosen task will not be difficult to undertake and will not require significant changes in a person’s lifestyle. Thus, new changes are more likely to be employed on a regular or ongoing basis if they are not too difficult.
- Clients should be encouraged to use the Pathway to Change worksheet flexibly. Rather than punishing themselves or becoming demotivated when failing to carry out the behavior on the intended date, it is more helpful for clients to look at the pathway as a dynamic process; they can always set new dates and try again. Otherwise, not carrying out the behavior can result in lower self-efficacy of the client, as though the client “does not have what it takes” to make the desired changes.
- Exposure to the pathway to change worksheet can serve as a prime or reminder. Therefore, your client can put the worksheet where it can be seen every day (e.g., on the refrigerator or office desk). Note that some clients may consider their worksheets a private source of inspiration. If this is the case, they should think of a place that limits who can view their work. The point is that your client’s worksheet should be accessible to him/her and should not be placed where he/she will fall out of the habit of looking at it.



## References

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- Gollwitzer, P. M. (1990). Action phases and mindsets. In E. T. Higgins & R. M. Sorrentino (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition: Foundations of social behavior*, Vol. 2, pp. 53-92). The Guilford Press.
- Histed, M. H., Pasupathy, A., & Miller, E. K. (2009). Learning substrates in the primate prefrontal cortex and striatum: sustained activity related to successful actions. *Neuron*, 63, 244-253.
- Yailagh, M.S., Lloyd, J., & Walsh, J. (2009). The causal relationships between attribution styles, mathematics self-efficacy beliefs, gender differences, goal setting, and mathematics achievement of school children. *Journal of Education & Psychology*, 3, 95-114.



# Building Self-Efficacy by Taking Small Steps

## Introduction

We all have specific patterns of behavior (that is, things we tend to do or say) that we would like to change. The good news is that it often takes only a small change to get things moving in a positive direction. In this exercise, we will begin to work towards changing a particular pattern of behavior by learning to take small, achievable steps.

### Part 1: Preparation

For this exercise, you will need the worksheet in Appendix A. An example of a completed worksheet is shown in Appendix B.

#### *1a. Describe what you would like to change*

Describe something that you would like to change. For instance, you might want to start doing something new (e.g., meditation) or, perhaps, you would like to start doing more of something you already do (e.g., cooking) or change an undesirable habit (e.g. quit smoking). Describe what you would like to change under “Change” in your “Pathway to Change” diagram (see Appendix A).

#### *1b. Identify the smallest step in the right direction*

What is one small step that you could take to help you get just a little bit closer to where you want to be? So, for instance, imagine you would like to meditate, you could start by meditating just for one minute. If you would like to exercise more, you could start by taking a five-minute walk. Try to think of something specific that is not too difficult and can be done in the following days. Briefly describe this first step in the square underneath the first circle of your Pathway to Change in Appendix A.

#### *1c. Plan the step*

When, in the next week, could you take the step you described in 1b? Write down this date in the square box under the first step in your Pathway to Change.

### Part 2: Action

2a. After you have completed Part 1, place a checkmark in the upper right corner of the square box under step 1 in your Pathway to Change.

2b. Now that you have started moving in a new direction, it is important to keep moving! To keep moving does not mean taking big steps. A journey is made of many steps. Now, think of another thing that you can do that will help you move a bit closer to where you want to be. Briefly describe this next step in the following square box in your Pathway to Change.



2c. When, in the next week, could you take the step you described in 2b? Write down this date in your Pathway to Change.

2d. After you have completed the step, put a checkmark in the upper right corner of the square box in your Pathway to Change.

2e. Repeat this process for every step you will take, gradually completing more and more steps on your Pathway to Change.

### Part 3: Reflection

Throughout your pathway to change, it is essential to reflect on your journey so far. In the pathway to change worksheet, you will find primers for these moments shown in the diamond shapes with the light bulb illustration.

You may reflect on these questions:

- What have I learned about myself?
- Can I see that I have what it takes to make changes?
- How much do I believe in myself?
- How do I feel about myself?



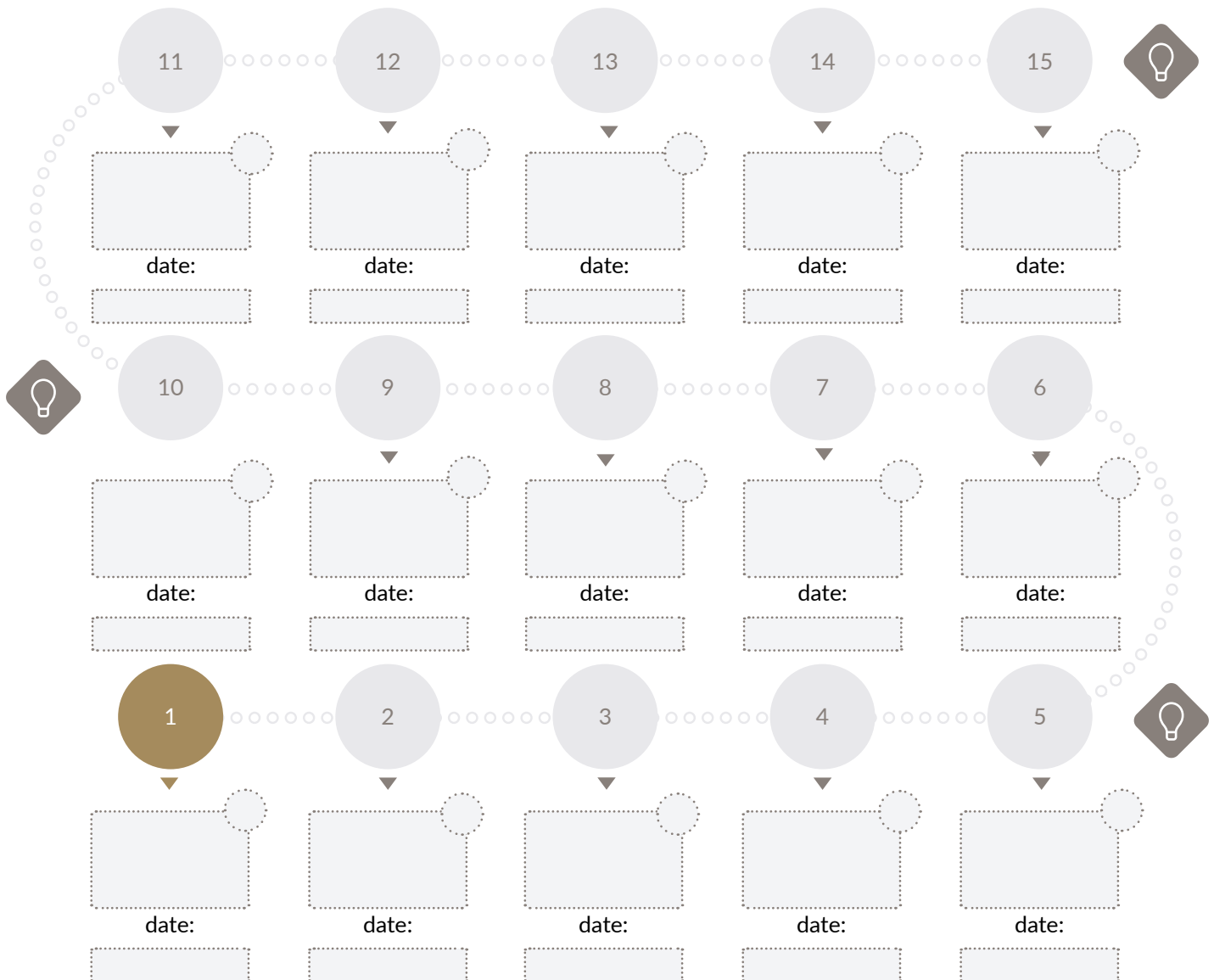
## Appendix A: My pathway to change

### Change

This is what I will change:

### Steps

These are the steps I will take:



**Appendix B:** Example of a completed pathway to change

**Change**

This is what I will change:

*I will increase my well-being by running*

**Steps**

These are the steps I will take:

