

Helping clients achieve goals without sounding like a therapist

Practicing nutrition is challenging because it deals with compulsive behaviours linked to our emotions and beliefs.

Supporting clients with a healthy eating plan is our first priority, but fixing the mindset behind poor eating choices is equally as important.

The thing is, most of us aren't therapists.

How do we deal with clients who can't seem to make progress?

The first hurdle is getting clients to listen to proper nutritional advice. After all, it's easy for anyone to tune out the negatives and only hear what they want to hear.

I once sat next to a woman on a plane who, after learning I was a nutritionist, spent the entire flight telling me how easily she put on weight and that she was "naturally big" despite all her efforts. (She ate an entire packet of biscuits as she told me this story).

The point is, she wasn't deliberately sabotaging her efforts. If she were to recognise her bingeing, it would be the first step to making a change.

"I only eat salad...and cupcakes"

Start by assuming that your client isn't lying, tricking you, or a lost cause. As tempting as this may be when you're getting frustrated with your client's progress, remember they will be just as frustrated.

You need to hold a metaphorical mirror up to your client. But how?

The first step is to go back to basics with an old-fashioned food diary. However these aren't always reliable if people leave out a nibble of cheese here, two squares of chocolate there...

Instead, we should do **two things** to ensure the success of our mirror:

1. Have clients photograph their food

There's typically one thing our clients always have with them: their phone. Have your client take a photo of everything they eat before they eat it. If it's passing their lips, it gets photographed. Yes, even that bite they stole when they served up the kids' dinner!

2. Weigh your client before and after they record their food diary

Weighing clients is another way to encourage transparency. When people take photos of their food, they have nowhere to hide. Either they choose not to photograph certain foods, or they're honest with themselves, and stop eating them altogether. By weighing clients you can assess whether their spotless food diary is a) genuine and b) spotless *because* they cut out certain foods they'd otherwise have to document with their camera.

If this does happen, remember it's a positive outcome; they've still learnt something. We aren't trying to 'catch someone out' - we just want them to become aware of what's sabotaging their efforts.

The next thing we need to do is re-examine their motivation and confidence. Most people know what healthy eating looks like, so the issue is ensuring goals are in place to drive success.

“Am I capable of change?”

Wanting is different to doing. Clients can get stuck when they haven't aligned goals to their drive and capabilities.

A client might set a goal to complete an Ironman, but as a mum of two with a full-time business and house being built, they probably don't have time to train for one. When you quiz them about it, spending time with their kids or working will always outweigh spending three hours out running. They would fail at their goal, not because they're lazy or couldn't ever achieve it, but because it's not realistic right now.

Sometimes clients will approach us with a New Year's resolution to drop 30kg, but they're in the middle of starting a new job, renovating their bathroom, or recovering from a bear attack.

Here you want to assess not just their motivation, but how confident they are of success.

Ask two simple questions:

1. On a scale of 1 - 10 how much do you want to achieve x goal?
2. On a scale of 1 - 10 how confident are you that you can achieve x goal?

Once you've answered these, it'll help you and your client to focus on what's hampering their efforts. Do they need to restructure their goals so that they're more meaningful? Or do they need to work on their confidence?

If they do need to work on confidence, breaking down their goals so that they can achieve small wins should do the trick.

“How do I make it easier to be healthy?”

For most clients, remembering to take vitamins twice a day, every day, just won't happen.

So how can we help clients achieve goals such as this? We can break down the barriers.

Using the vitamin example, you could suggest a vitamin tray so clients can prep for the week ahead and just pop open the compartment for that day. Not only is it easier than having several bottles, it's also a visual reminder to empty each compartment every day.

Exercise is also key;

- What will help clients put their trainers on and hit the treadmill?
- Are they more motivated for a team sport?
- Exercising with a friend?

- Swapping to a morning from an afternoon?
- Or signing up for an event?

What will push them to say 'yes' to the healthier option rather than 'no'?

The final, and perhaps most important part of the equation, is making sure your client has their goals clearly set out.

“What am I doing again?”

If your client hasn't set clear and realistic goals, none of the above will work, and their progress will stall.

Is their goal written in a way that's measurable against their progress; can they tackle it in bite-sized stages which are realistic and meaningful for them, and is there a set timeframe?

If they can't tick these boxes, it'll be harder for them to prioritise their goal and move forward.

In summary

Here's some of the ways you can support your client without sounding like a therapist:

1. Show them how their habits may be harming their progress with a 'photo food diary'.
2. Assess their motivation and confidence to change. Do they really believe in their goal and ability to achieve it?
3. Remove barriers to help them make healthy changes. What can be altered in their day to make being healthy easier?
4. Reassess their goals. Are they written in a way that's meaningful - not overwhelming, and are they easy to measure with a set end point?

Think about any clients on your books right now who seem stuck. Maybe they've ghosted you a few times, cancelled appointments, or just not turned up.

What are some of the ways you could support them with their goals? Reach out to them with some ideas to renew their confidence in moving forward.