

What's Next? Making Life Plans After College

by Sandy Maynard

When you graduate from college or make any of life's major transitions (starting a career, getting married, having a family), not knowing what happens next can be stressful. Making a life plan can help ease that anxiety by creating sense of control over your life's direction, and establishing a set of goals to work toward.

Start with a personal inventory of what you value in life. Is it a career or family and friends; financial security or spirituality; intellectual fulfillment or leisure time? Many of us value all of those things to varying degrees, but our priorities shift as we move into different phases of our life. This is why a "five-year" plan is popular for managing life's goals: it allows us to re-evaluate what we want and adjust our direction.

Start your five-year plan by detailing the steps you need to take that will bring you closer to some of your long-term goals. Once again write them down, as writing them down sets the process in motion. Be as specific as possible. Once you have completed a five-year plan, you are ready to break that down into a one-year plan, a six-month plan and last, but not least, a one-month plan, making a map of each step that needs to be taken to achieve the life you want.

Stay on course with the following guidelines:

Be Realistic

One goal should not contradict another. Purchasing an expensive home on a moderate income will take away from other goals. You may find yourself working overtime to pay the mortgage and not have the time you want for family and friends.

State Your Goals in the Positive, not the Negative

Saying you want to lose ten pounds is not as powerful as committing yourself to healthy eating habits. State that you want to eat foods low in sugar and fat content.

Be Specific

Always answer how, what, where and when for a goal.

Motivate Yourself

Is your motive intrinsic or extrinsic? Do you want it for money, marks and praise, or are you doing it for self-actualization, mastery or the sheer joy of it? Intrinsic motives are more powerful.

Keep Your Operational Goals Small

Each step along the way is doable if you break it down enough.

Get Rid of Limiting Beliefs

Some of our beliefs do not support our goals, such as, "I'm too old to go back to school."

Learn from your Mistakes and Move on

If something did not work out the way you

planned, then you have learned a great deal about what not to do the next time.

Use Visualization

Making a picture in your mind's eye of what you want is a very powerful motivator. If you have difficulty with this, then cut out a picture from a magazine that symbolizes it and put it where you will see it often.

Identify Obstacles

Recognize what is limiting you and put together a plan to overcome it. Do you lack a resource such as better computer skills to succeed at work, or do you need to take a workshop in social skills to be a better listener for family and friends?

Separate the Relevant From the Irrelevant

Sometimes we just need to let the dishes sit in the sink, as meeting an important deadline comes first. Prioritizing and letting go of perfectionism will help you navigate toward your goals more smoothly.

Be Grateful

Wanting what we have and being grateful for it can give us great pleasure. There will always be ups and downs and struggles to overcome. Negativity does nothing more than make things seem worse. Remember, life is not free of pain, but suffering is optional. You are the navigator of your life and may have to steer through some heavy storms, but have faith that you can, and you will. ■