

## Module 24 Transcript

### From Goal to Purpose

Take a moment to visualize the version of yourself you want to be--a happier, healthier, more complete you. Now describe that person--except, the trick is, you can't describe things that they *are*--happy, fulfilled, in a loving relationship, great with kids. Instead, you can only describe what they do. How do they fill their days? What types of habits do they subscribe to? What do they eat?

If that was difficult, you're not alone. That's because goal setting, visualization, and complex problem-solving, while at the very cornerstone of our mental health journey, can be some of the most elusive mental fitness skills to master. And doing so, can change your entire outlook in monumental ways.

Purpose is a towering concept. Regardless of belief systems, our brains are all seeking purpose, seeking meaning. But what do we really mean when we say *purpose*? It's that version of yourself you envisioned before. It's not something that I can put out there for you, because it's deeply personal for each individual. Maybe it's best defined as a culmination of goals--what's on the other side of the process. Maybe it's a set of skills or a mindset that you've worked yourself into. Maybe it's dedication to a cause or to a set of individuals.

We've talked about goals and motivation and now I want to dig into two aspects of them that can be elusive for all of us: setting goals and achieving them.

If we think about goals as something we'd like to achieve that won't happen without us putting forth action or effort, then there are two distinct paradigms through which we can look at goal setting. A results-oriented goal is defined by, naturally, the ultimate results you obtain. In a fitness context, it would be: I want to have six-pack abs. Or, I want to run a 10k in under 47 minutes. On the other hand, you have process-oriented goals, which are what

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they sound like. These goals are built around the activity or steps you take. So, this could be that you want to go to the gym three times a week. Or run three miles every other day.

When working with patients, I prefer to focus on these process-oriented goals for a couple reasons. For one, they are immediately actionable. If your process goal is to, say, incorporate leafy greens into your diet five times a week, that's something you can start, and start succeeding at immediately. And because the goal is continuous and ongoing, the habit loop forms much more quickly and easily.

These process-oriented goals also provide an opportunity to be more mindful with tracking and planning. It may seem like a small thing, but checking off an activity on a to-do list comes with its own sense of satisfaction and an accompanying rush of dopamine.

In following through with these goal pursuits, it's also advisable to follow a pattern of graduated exposure, which is basically a term for small steps. As you begin to retool your diet, don't feel the need to dive in headfirst and totally revolutionize your diet. Subbing out some simple ingredients can set a baseline for further successes down the road. Similarly, if your goal is to become more sociable, it may be daunting to jump right into a first date, or to join a team sport. But you can start by picking out new outfits or researching possible opportunities and places for that first date. Small achievable steps, so you're always succeeding.

So, we return to purpose, that elusive concept at the heart of everything we've talked about. If you've gone through the entirety of this course, you've heard me talk several times about filtering the science, data, recommendations, and case studies through your own gaze and adapting what we have to say to your own circumstances, preferences, and abilities. My job, I think is to provide you with the information in the best way I can so that you are equipped with the agency to change your mental health, your habits, and your life for the better. And where that goes, in terms of specifics, is entirely up to you.

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So again, consider the question that started off this whole thing: *what can I do to live a life I enjoy more?* Because, at the end of the day, that is where your purpose--whatever it may be--will stem from. It doesn't matter if your primary focus is more optimal health, less brain fog, relief from anxiety or depression, or just a good night's sleep, all of it is nestled within greater enjoyment and mental fitness.

It reminds me of a patient whom I met several years ago. She came to see me, and she wasn't quite sure why. She wasn't feeling that well. I asked her what her goals for treatment were, and she said she just wanted to understand herself a little better. By working with her, we started to name some of the feelings she had and started to explore more of the states that she felt good in, and the states she felt anxious or stressed in. It became clear that the time in nature and specifically the time she spent in her greenhouse and gardening were some of best moments she had. There was a ripple effect she noticed that when she did some planting, she felt immediate relief of stress and her interactions with family after planting and gardening were more positive as she was in a better mind frame. By naming her feelings, we put her understanding at the center of her purpose, which was to be more closely tied to nature, her garden, and to be more disciplined to keep making gardening and nature a priority in her life. This may not sound like purpose to you, or even to me, but for my patient this was a wellspring from which her mental health and her mental fitness really poured forth and over years this completely transformed how she spends her days and how she engages with those she loves. It has created a real social network for her with others interested in some of the same aspects of gardening and nature appreciation. So often, as a therapist and psychiatrist, I often meet people who want to improve their relationships; often I meet people when they are single, and their goal isn't graduated. They want to be in a relationship, which may be vague and hard to achieve. I help break this down into graduated exposures. If someone is very socially anxious, simply saying it's time to bite the bullet and date more, isn't the best way to help them change. Instead, what graduated change allows us to see is the first steps by creating an online

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dating profile, or shopping for some outfits you feel more confident in. Another set of steps is to really redefine the purpose. The purpose of being in a relationship is to have companionship, to have more accountability, to evolve, and to challenge ourselves emotionally. When that is clear as the purpose and we think in the framework of graduated change, we can all create individual steps. Creating a relationship, falling in love is not a monumental or ethereal task, it is specific. For example, next Tuesday night I will try to message some people on a dating app or next Thursday I will investigate that poetry reading group at the local pub. It's something specific that leads towards a life's purpose, with more connection, deeper relationships, better overall mental health, and mental fitness.

So, in summary, all of what you've learned in this course – the efforts to improve sleep, to improve nutrition, to improve your connections, and to improve your ability to understand your inner world, really are all to help inform your clarity and your sense of purpose. Why are you here, how are you feeling, and what are you going to do with your new sense of mental fitness?