



Therapy Goal-Setting: A Human-Centered Guide for Clinicians

This handout is designed for therapists who want to support clients in setting meaningful, actionable goals—without pathologizing pain or rushing the process. Use these reframes, questions, and metaphors in sessions, supervision, or your own reflection practice.

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Reframing Emotional Goals into Behavioral Goals

❖ Emotional Goal: “I just want to stop feeling this way.”

💡 Reframe: “Totally fair. These feelings are exhausting. What if part of our work together is learning ways to carry those feelings with a little more ease—so they don’t run the show?”

❖ Emotional Goal: “I want to feel happy/confident/calm/in love/etc.”

💡 Reframe: “Sounds like there’s a part of you that’s missing that experience. Let’s think together about what helps you feel more connected to that—are there any actions, relationships, or practices that support that feeling, even a little?”

❖ Emotional Goal: “I don’t want to learn to live with it—I want it gone.”

💡 Reframe: “I hear that. No one wants to keep carrying this. But if we could figure out how to stop it from hijacking your life—even if it’s still in the background—would that be a step worth exploring?”

Shifting Dead Person’s Goals into Living Goals

💡 Ask instead:

- “If that [feeling/behavior] wasn’t happening, what would you be doing instead?”
 - “What might someone see you doing differently in your daily life?”
 - “What would movement look like, even with the hard stuff still hanging around?”
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Clarifying Outcome Goals

❖ Outcome Goal: “I want a partner / a better job / my kid to behave / peace in my body.”

💡 Reframe:

“Totally valid wants. Let’s look at what’s in your control. What can you say or do that moves you closer to that hope, even if the outcome isn’t guaranteed?”

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Reframing Insight Goals

❖ Insight Goal: “I want to understand why I do this.”

💡 Reframe:

“That makes sense—understanding can bring clarity. And once we understand it more, what would you want to do differently?”

❖ Insight Goal: “I need to figure out what’s wrong with me.”

💡 Reframe:

“That’s a heavy lens to carry. What if we explore not just what’s wrong, but what’s hurting—and how to care for it in the meantime?”

Therapist Reflection Prompts

- 🌀 Am I prioritizing comfort over growth?
 - 🌀 Where am I hesitating to ask about goals because I fear disrupting rapport?
 - 🌀 Do I feel stuck when insight doesn’t translate to change?
 - 🌀 Am I reinforcing emotional avoidance without meaning to?
 - 🌀 Am I offering movement, even gently, when the client needs it?
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Use this as a flexible tool—something you can come back to when sessions stall, clients resist, or you feel lost in the fog. The goal isn’t perfection. The goal is presence, curiosity, and a gentle reorientation toward what matters.

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