From Vision to Reality

A Practical Guide to Setting SMART Goals Rooted in Your Values and Built to Last

Presented by Dr. Cindy Ruelas-Tafolla

DSW, LCSW, CCM, BCD, CLWC

A message from Dr. Cindy:

One of the most common things I hear from clients is this: "I know what I want. I just can't seem to get there."

After more than two decades of clinical practice, I have come to understand something important. Most people are not failing because they lack discipline or motivation. They are failing because the goals they are pursuing are either structurally unclear, emotionally disconnected from what actually matters to them, or both.

This guide gives you a complete system: a personal vision to point your direction, a values clarification process to make sure you are headed somewhere that genuinely means something, and the SMART framework to give your goal the structural clarity it needs to become real.

Work through each section in order. Write honestly. A goal that comes from who you genuinely are will always sustain you longer than one that comes from who you think you should be.

Dr. Cindy Ruelas-Tafolla, DSW, LCSW, CCM, BCD, CLWC Tel: 469-389-8459 www.drcindyruelas-tafolla.com

Why Goals Stall — and What Actually Changes That

In my clinical work, I have watched many driven, capable people set goals with every intention of following through — and then slowly lose steam. Not because the goal was wrong, but because something crucial was missing.

- Goals need to be specific enough for your brain to actually orient toward them. Vague intentions give the mind nothing concrete to work with.
- Progress needs to be visible. When progress is invisible, motivation evaporates.
- Goals disconnected from your genuine values eventually feel hollow. Willpower is finite. Meaning is not.
- A clear vision keeps you oriented when motivation naturally fluctuates. Without one, every obstacle becomes a reason to reconsider everything.

A clinical note: *The most sustainable changes I have witnessed in practice share one thing: the person was not just pursuing a goal. They were moving toward a version of their life that felt genuinely worth building. That distinction matters more than any framework.*

Part One: Your Personal Vision

Before you set a single goal, get clear on the bigger picture — the kind of life you are actually trying to build.

A personal vision statement is not a wishlist or a performance review. It is a grounded, honest articulation of who you are becoming, what principles you most want to guide your decisions, and what you want the shape of your life to reflect over time.

Writing it down matters. People who articulate their vision in writing and return to it regularly follow through on their goals at a significantly higher rate than those who keep it only in their heads.

Use these questions to write yours:

1	**What do you most want to be true about your life:** Not what you want to have — what you want to be living, feeling, and contributing.
2	**What principles most want to guide how you move through the world:** Not values you admire from a distance — the ones that feel most like you when you are at your best.
3	**What do you want the people closest to you to carry forward:** This question gets underneath surface goals and into legacy — where real clarity often lives.
4	**What has been getting in the way of living more fully in alignment with this vision:** Naming obstacles honestly is part of the process. You cannot navigate around something you have not named.
5	**Write one paragraph in the present tense:** Not "I want to" — "I am." Brief enough to read every morning.

From clinical practice: *When I do this exercise with clients, the most revealing moment is often when they realize they have been writing someone else's vision. If you notice that happening, pause and ask: if no one else would ever read this, what would I actually write?*

Part Two: Clarifying Your Core Values

Values are not aspirations. They are the principles that actually govern your choices when you are paying attention — and the ones whose violation produces the most consistent dissatisfaction when ignored.

A SMART goal built on top of a genuine value sustains itself. A SMART goal built on top of external pressure or someone else's expectations does not.

Reflect on these questions:

- Think of a moment when you felt most fully like yourself — most alive and most clear. What were you doing? What was being honored in that moment?
- Think of a time you felt persistent, low-grade resentment at a situation or pattern — not a person. What value was being consistently violated?
- If the people who know you most deeply were asked to describe what you stand for, what would they say?
- Of all the things you give your energy to, which ones feel like an expression of who you are — and which feel disconnected from anything that genuinely matters to you?

Part Three: Building Your SMART Goal

Once you know where you are going and what matters most to you, the SMART framework gives your goal the structural clarity it needs to become actionable. Your vision is your destination. Your values are your compass. A SMART goal is the specific road you are going to take to get there.

S — Specific — What exactly will you do?

A specific goal answers what exactly you will accomplish, what actions you will take, and what success actually looks like. The more precisely you can describe the outcome, the more readily your mind can orient toward it.

Ask yourself:

- What exactly am I trying to accomplish?
- What actions will I take to get there?
- What will success concretely look like?
- Who else needs to be involved?

M — Measurable — How will you track progress?

Progress that you can see sustains motivation in a way that abstract intention cannot. Measurable goals have a source of data — something you can look at and say: I am moving, or I am stuck.

Ask yourself:

- What will I track to know I am making progress?
- What milestones will I mark along the way?
- How often will I check in on my progress?
- What would tell me I have arrived?

A — Achievable — Is this within your genuine reach?

Achievable does not mean easy — it means the goal stretches you without exceeding your current capacity to the point of discouragement. The goal should require growth, not require a version of yourself that does not yet exist.

Ask yourself:

- Do I have the skills this requires, or can I develop them?
- What would make this more realistically achievable?
- Is the effort proportional to what it will produce?
- What obstacles am I most likely to encounter?

R Relevant — Does this align with your vision?

A goal can be specific, measurable, achievable, and time-bound — and still feel hollow if it is not connected to what actually matters to you. Ask honestly: is this goal something I want, or something I think I should want?

Ask yourself:

- Does this goal directly serve my personal vision?
- Which of my core values does this honor?
- Will achieving this matter in a way that reflects who I actually am?
- Is this MY goal or someone else's expectation I have internalized?

T Time-Bound — When exactly will this happen?

A goal without a deadline is a wish. A specific time frame creates urgency, focuses effort, and gives you a clear point at which to assess progress and celebrate what has been accomplished.

Ask yourself:

- What is my realistic target completion date?
- What should I have accomplished halfway through?
- What is my very first step — and when will I take it?
- Is this timeline realistic given my other commitments?

Part Four: Your Complete SMART Goal Statement

Now bring it all together. Using everything you worked through above, write your complete SMART goal as a single clear statement. Specific enough to act on. Measurable enough to track. Achievable with effort. Aligned with your vision. Time-bound.

Part Five: The Values Alignment Check

Before you begin pursuing this goal, pause and run it through one final check. This is the step that separates goals that sustain from goals that eventually hollow out. Answer each question as honestly as you can.

produce results — but they feel entirely different to live inside of.

whether this goal truly belongs to me.

would I still want to pursue it?

quit?

Part Six: Your Action Plan

A SMART goal with no action plan is still just a well-articulated intention. Identify your first three concrete steps and build the accountability structure that will hold you when motivation naturally fluctuates — which it always does.

My second step — what follows the first and by when:

My third step — the one that will require the most courage or discipline:

Who I will tell about this goal and how they will hold me accountable:

What I will do on the first day I feel like quitting — my specific plan for that moment:

How I will acknowledge meaningful progress before I reach the final goal:

The right support makes the difference between a goal you set and a goal you actually achieve.

Dr. Cindy works with adults navigating major life transitions, career shifts, relationship changes, and the deeper work of building a life that genuinely reflects who they are — using an integrative, trauma-informed approach grounded in over two decades of clinical experience.

Tel: 469-389-8459 | drcindy@drcindyruelas-tafolla.com
www.drcindyruelas-tafolla.com
Book a consultation: calendly.com/cinrueusc-jc2b/30min

Licensed in CA · CO · FL · NV · NM · TX · WY · In-person & virtual · Se Habla Espanol

This guide was written by Dr. Cindy Ruelas-Tafolla, DSW, LCSW, CCM, BCD, CLWC for educational purposes only and does not constitute psychological treatment or clinical advice. If you are experiencing a mental health emergency, please call 988 or 911.