



# National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

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## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND THE HOLIDAYS: BEYOND RESOLUTIONS, ENVISIONING YOUR FUTURE Technical Assistance Guidance

Authored by Ivonne Ortiz

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*With the holiday season fast approaching, and as we naturally reflect on the year that has passed, questions may arise about how to set and achieve life goals and envision the short- and long-term future. The New Year's holiday provides an opportunity for domestic violence programs to engage in positive visioning with advocates and survivors. The guidance that follows was developed by the NRC DV's Capacity Building and Education Team in collaboration with Jenna Lodge Foster, Domestic Violence & Youth Initiatives Training Consultant.*

For the past several years, the NRC DV has released a series of Technical Assistance Guidance to the field in preparation for the holidays, defined here as the time period beginning the week of Thanksgiving through New Year's Day. Although the common perception that domestic violence increases during the holidays remains prevalent, available research on such a link is still limited and inconclusive (see discussion in the December 2011 TA Guidance, [Domestic Violence and the Holidays](#)). Information on the number of calls received by the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH)<sup>1</sup> for the past ten years indicates that the number of calls drops dramatically during the holidays, including on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day (see [Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the Hotline](#), pg. 8 for additional information).

For many people around the world, January first represents an opportunity for renewal or re-birth, a time to make a promise towards self-improvement. We call these promises New Year's resolutions, which often center on physical and mental health goals. We enter into the new year with this new resolve, hopeful for the future. We feel highly optimistic and are ready to make changes that will transform our lives. Unfortunately, the common reality is that after a few weeks we revert to our habits and forget or ignore our resolutions. This Technical Assistance Guidance is intended to help advocates and survivors at domestic violence programs think beyond resolutions and harness the energy of the coming new year to focus on setting realistic life goals that will promote resilience and healing.

### Life Goals vs. Resolutions

*Life goals* and *resolutions* are two concepts that may be confused, especially when we are thinking of making positive changes in our lives. While both involve making some changes or following a different life pattern, they differ in terms of scope.

According to [Dictionary.com](#), a resolution refers to the act of determining an action, course of action or procedure. Resolutions made at New Year's are often a **promise** we make to ourselves to change our current way of living and attempt to live a better and fuller life.

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<sup>1</sup> NDVH call data reflect individuals reaching out on a toll-free helpline for assistance, including victims, friends and family, and less frequently, offenders.

Many of us make resolutions on New Year’s Day, but according to British psychologist Richard Wiseman, more than 80% of us (or approximately 4 in 5) fail at keeping our resolutions (Lehrer, 2009). The main reason for this failure is that the resolutions we set are either unrealistic or too abstract. For instance, one of the most popular abstract resolutions is the desire to “get in shape.” A more concrete goal would focus on modifying daily habits with a *specific* task such as walking for 30 minutes 3 times per week.

A life goal is a desired *result* that we wish to achieve, an end-point where we see ourselves after a certain period of time. Life goal setting is a powerful process for thinking about our ideal future, and for motivating ourselves to turn our vision of this future into reality (MindTools.com). The process of setting goals helps us plan where we want to go in life. By knowing precisely what we want to achieve, we know where we have to concentrate our efforts. When we are focused on moving toward a set life goal, we will often make decisions by asking ourselves “*Will this get me closer to my goal?*” thus avoiding choices or pathways that may not. SMART goal setting (discussed below), is a concrete way of organizing our goals and creating verifiable trajectories to accomplishments.

*“What a mistake – the whole idea around New Year’s resolutions. People aren’t picking specific behaviors, they’re picking abstractions.”*

– BJ Fogg, Stanford University

### **Making our Life Goals a Reality**

Envisioning life goals may be more important than we realize. When we envision what we want to accomplish, our brain invests itself into our life goals as if we had accomplished them. That is, by setting something as a *goal*, however small or large, however near or far in the future, a part of our brain believes that a desired outcome is an essential part of who we are – setting up the conditions that drive us to work toward the goals to fulfill the brain’s self-image (Wax, n.d.). One study found that mental practices are almost as effective as true physical practice, and that doing both is more effective than either alone (Ranganathana et al., 2013). This study also highlights the strength of the mind-body connection, or the link between thoughts and behaviors – a very important connection for achieving your life goals.

Envisioning your life goals makes you feel good, gives you hope, and encourages you to spend more time thinking about your future.

Research suggests that mental practice could be almost as effective as physical training (LeVan, 2009). One study found that imagining weight lifting caused actual changes in subjects’ muscle activity (Bakker et al., 1996). The process of envisioning our goals impacts many cognitive processes in the brain: motor control, attention, perception, planning, and memory, so that the brain is getting trained for actual performance during visualization. The process of setting life goals is intended to be voluntary and exciting, not burdensome. It can help you choose where you want to go in life. It provides a clear direction—a personal guide to lead the way during times of confusion. It also helps to turn abstract goals into concrete, measurable goals. According to the **American Psychological Association**, the capacity to make realistic plans and know which steps to take to carry them out is one of the core factors for building resilience.

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress ([American Psychological Association, n.d.](#)). Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have; rather, it is an innate human capacity that involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that anyone can learn and develop. Behaviors that promote resilience range from adopting meditative practices to meeting with a religious congregation, relying on one’s culture and community, running, seeing a therapist, or keeping a journal. We know the effects of victimization may linger for years, and the process of recovery demands strength, resourcefulness, and tenacity. Yet, despite the challenges they face, most survivors have the power to reclaim, strengthen, and transform their lives in unexpected ways. If you want to learn more about supporting survivors in building resilience, read [VAWnet’s November 2015 TA Question of the Month](#).

As we know, survivors who escape violent relationships face many challenges when starting over, which is why envisioning and setting life goals is an important step towards resiliency and healing. Advocates can foster survivors’ capacity for resilience by finding and drawing on their strengths ([National Center for Victims of Crime, n.d.](#)). By helping survivors overcome obstacles, advocates share in their victories. Setting goals can also be a tool for both survivors and advocates to raise self-confidence, as the process includes recognizing abilities and competence.



Advocates can create safe places for survivors to re-group, think and begin their healing journey before moving to the next stage of their lives. According to NNEDV’s *DV Counts Census*, in 24 hours, 36,608 domestic violence victims found refuge in emergency shelters or transitional housing provided by local domestic violence programs (2015). Imagine the impact of enhancing programming with life goal envisioning activities to this volume of survivors!

Although this process can be life changing for many, it’s important to remember that not all survivors will be in a place where they are ready to think long term because of the crisis they are experiencing. Life goal envisioning is a very effective and powerful tool, but should be introduced in a way that is **trauma-informed** as to not overwhelm or pressure survivors who are not ready to think beyond how they can survive the day to day.

### Getting Started

As you get started, you may realize that some important life goals may be short-term. For advocates a short-term life goal might be better time management, while a long-term goal could be to plan for retirement. For survivors, a short-term life goal might include securing employment, applying to school, or finding financial assistance to pay for childcare, while a long-term goal might be

Do not assume that all survivors share the same goals. Many would agree that they don't want violence in their lives, but may not agree on the details on how to accomplish that. It is important that everyone is clear on what their own life goals are and how to come together to provide support to each other.

home ownership. Life goals, short- or long-term, can be important to set your direction and revisit in order to assess personal or professional achievements and to see how your life may have changed or how your feelings about what you want may change. Remember, it is important to celebrate achievements, big or small, along the way toward achieving the final goal.

*"I used to suffer with low self-esteem and self-confidence as a result of an abusive relationship. One thing that helped me see myself as a person of value was the process of goal setting. My very first goal was to make one friend so I had someone to go to coffee with. That was it. The friend didn't have to be close – my criterion for successful goal achievement was to just initiate a relationship with another person to the point where it was socially comfortable to catch up for a coffee." – Taz*

### **Step 1: Thinking it through**

The first step in life goal setting is to take time to think about your life and separate abstract goals from concrete goals. After thinking about your goals, use the following questions to guide your process:

1. What do I want in a year, two years or five years?
2. What do I NOT want?
3. What is important to me? This can include people as well as your values.
4. What are the most important wants (or goals)?
5. Did I think about things like: family, safety, my faith, financial needs, my community or other things that are important to me?
6. What are my top five personal values? Do these goals fit with my values? Is there anything I would add or leave out after thinking about this?

**Tip:** Set **SMART** goals.

The simple fact is that for goals to be powerful, they should be designed to be SMART.

**Specific-** The goal should be clear and well defined.

**Measurable-** Make sure that there is a way to measure your degree of success.

**Attainable-** Goals should be achievable.

**Relevant-** Goals should be aligned with the direction you want your life to go.

**Time Bound-** Your goals must have a deadline.

### **Step 2: Contracting with yourself**

The second step in life goal setting is to write down your thoughts. Writing your goals will make them concrete and difficult to ignore, thereby making you accountable to them. As you write, be sure to use the language *will* instead of *would like* or *might*. Also be sure to set goals that motivate you, are important to you, and for which there is value in achieving them. This process is intended to be rewarding not burdensome.

### **Step 3: Visualization**

The third step in life goal setting is integrating visualization. Begin by establishing a specific goal. Imagine the future in which you have already achieved your goal. Hold a mental picture of it as if it were occurring in this very moment. Imagine the scene in as much detail as possible. Engage as many of the five senses as you can in your visualization.

Ask yourself:

- Who are you with?
- Which emotions are you feeling?
- What are you wearing?
- Is there a smell in the air?
- What do you hear?
- What is your environment?

Practice at night or in the morning (just before/after sleep). Eliminate any doubts, if they should come to you in the process. Repeat this practice often. Combine with a meditation or an affirmation such as *I am courageous, I am strong, I am confident, or I am capable!*

### SAMPLE ENVISIONING ACTIVITIES

There are many activities that programs can use to support survivors and advocates in envisioning their future. Samples for adaptation in your program are provided below.

#### River of life:

**River of life** is a visual narrative method that helps people tell stories of the past, present and future. It focuses on illustration rather than text, making it useful in groups that may not share a language. When used in a group, it is an active and engaging process, which includes the following steps:

- Draw an example river to help people visualize what it might look like.
- Ask participants to draw a river that represents where they come from, what led them to where they are in their lives right now and what they want to accomplish.
- Participants should use part of the page to represent what they can expect to achieve or learn about themselves, and how they will use this activity to move forward in their home or work environment.



#### Vision Board:

A vision board is a valuable visualization tool that allows a person's dreams, goals and true self to come to life in a creative way. Advocates and survivors can benefit from this exercise. Creating a vision board allows you to shift the focus from the "here and now" to make projections for the future. Vision boards can cultivate intrinsic and extrinsic change for both advocates and survivors. By using a 3-P model, which includes *Peace, Poise, and Position*, you can create a visual reminder of where you are going and truly "put yourself out into the world."

**Note for facilitators:** Supplies needed for this activity include: newspapers, magazines, paper or poster board, glue and scissors. First, explain the meaning of a vision board to participants. Next, encourage them to look for words, phrases or images in magazines, newspapers, or on the internet, that coincide with the 3 Ps. Participants should also be encouraged to utilize their personal photographs.



**Peace.** What calms your spirit? What warms your heart? What brings a smile to your face?

For the purposes of this exercise, *peace* focuses on looking at your life and identifying what brings you true peace. Do not focus on material things. Rather, focus on the *emotional* aspect of true peace and what that can bring to your life. Words, phrases, and magazine clippings that relate should be glued to the outer edges of the board to create an outer ring for your vision. Make sure to provide magazines that are diverse in cultural representations, language, gender, age, etc.

**Poise.** How do I want to be perceived? What personal changes need to be made in order to make bold, transformative change in my life? What characteristics do I admire most in others? What characteristics do I admire in myself?

For this exercise, *poise* is keeping your emotions in check while *creating action*. As advocates, we must have self-awareness when working with survivors. If we truly embrace trauma-informed care, we must be aware of how we impact others. Survivors also need a sense of self-awareness to move toward a safe, healthy, and stable lifestyle in the future. Words, phrases, pictures, and magazine clippings that relate should be glued to the inside of the outer ring of the board.

**Position.** What are my goals (spiritual/personal/professional)? What steps do I need to take to reach my goals? Who can I reach out to for support in order to reach my goals? What values do I possess right now to move my goals forward? How will my actions create positive change in my life?

Like a good game of chess, placement and position can be very important. For this exercise, *position* coincides with *action*. Words, phrases, pictures, and magazine clippings that relate should be glued to the remaining inner portion of the vision circle.

Once completed, you will have created a guide for your short and long-term goals, filled with positive shifts in emotion and action. Hang your vision board in a place where you will see it everyday. Be sure to visit it often and review the changes that are taking place in your life. Feel free to add more content as you move closer to your “best self.”

## **In Conclusion**

As Audre Lorde reminds us, “Our visions begin with our desires.” Setting and reflecting on our life goals can be empowering. Our goals can be as simple as taking time to sit quietly and breathe or as big as leaving an abusive relationship. As we approach the upcoming New Year’s holiday, use this opportunity to reflect and look toward the next year. Then practice setting goals instead of resolutions. This will increase your chances for success and keep you motivated and focused for the year to come. Set regular intervals (daily, weekly, monthly) to review your progress, add new goals if needed, and celebrate your accomplishments, no matter how small.

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## ADDITIONAL READING

**Building Resilience The Power to Cope With Adversity** by William R. Beardslee, Mary Watson Avery, Catherine C. Ayoub, Caroline L. Watts, and Patricia Lester for Zero to Three (2010)

**Trauma & Resilience: An Adolescent Provider Toolkit** by Alicia St. Andrews for the Adolescent Health Working Group (2013)

**The TOP Workbook for Sexual Health** by Joann Schladale for Resources for Resolving Violence (2015)

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## Effect of the Holidays on Calls to the National Domestic Violence Hotline

### Comparing Average Call Volume to Holiday Volume

These statistics represent the experience of the National Domestic Violence Hotline (NDVH) only. Representatives of state and local programs, along with representatives of law enforcement and medical staff, may have different seasonal experiences with victims and survivors of domestic violence.

**Table A: Average Calls vs. Thanksgiving Holidays—Number of Calls to the NDVH, 2005-2014**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<i>Average Week</i>	2863	3724	3829	4090	4189	5257	5110	5075	4725	5271
<b>Thanksgiving Week</b>	2312	3151	3285	3487	3546	4741	4080	4060	4214	4483
<b>The Week After</b>	2752	3596	3759	3831	4102	5432	5244	5207	4769	5257
<i>Average Day</i>	409	532	547	584	598	751	730	725	675	753
<b>Thanksgiving Day</b>	166	239	290	332	341	376	344	340	438	460

**Table B: Average Calls vs. Christmas and New Year's Holidays—Number of Calls to NDVH, 2004-2014**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<i>Average 17 day period</i>	7362	9846	9846	10512	10764	13518	13140	13050	12150	12801
<b>Dec 15 to Jan 1</b>	5625	7403	8540	10094	8367	12259	9958	9788	10991	12565
<i>Average 13 day period</i>	5726	7658	7658	8176	8372	10514	10220	10150	9450	9789
<b>Jan 2 to Jan 15</b>	5956	7563	8415	9413	7511	10702	9161	9001	9644	11136
<i>Average Day</i>	409	547	547	584	598	751	730	725	675	753
<b>Christmas Eve</b>	184	234	370	452	304	470	420	421	503	584
<b>Christmas Day</b>	160	208	270	394	258	374	359	355	381	421
<b>New Years Eve</b>	243	283	523	669	422	569	398	395	546	579
<b>New Years Day</b>	236	342	428	508	341	604	429	499	570	591

The NRCDV welcomes your input. If you have any comments or additional information to provide, please contact our Capacity Building and Education Team at [nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org](mailto:nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org).

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National Resource Center on Domestic Violence  
[nrcdv.org](http://nrcdv.org) | [VAWnet.org](http://VAWnet.org)  
 6041 Linglestown Road, Harrisburg PA 17112  
 800.537.2238