

Episode 212: Setting SMART Goals for Headache and Migraine Management

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Hello and welcome to HeadWise, the videocast and podcast of the National Headache Foundation. I'm Dr. Lindsay Weitzel. I'm the founder of Migraine Nation, and I have a history of chronic and daily migraine that began at the age of four. I'm excited and honored today because I am here with Dr. Dawn Buse. Hello, Dr. Buse, how are you today?

Dawn Buse, PhD:

Hi, everybody. Hi, Lindsay. And hello to everyone joining us.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Dr. Buse is a Clinical Professor of Neurology and a psychologist who specializes in headache. She is a repeat guest. We love having her. She always has so much awesome information for us. She is very well known and respected in our community, and I am excited to have her here today.

Today we have a sort of special episode. We're going to go over some ideas that we can incorporate into our life in 2025 to improve our lives with migraine. And then Dr. Buse is going to go over the strategies for successful behavior change so that she can help us all incorporate these things successfully into our lives and just do a great job of it. And I'm really excited because I want to learn from Dr. Buse today along with everyone else.

We're going to sort of go over a few of the categories where people with migraine might want to incorporate change in order to help our health. And then we're going to go over some strategies on how to do that. I think one of the first places that we thought people would want to change is exercise and movement. That can be really hard for those of us with migraine. We also went over sleep, a lot of us don't sleep and we need to sleep in order to feel better, hydration and diet, stress management, and then general self-care and well-being. And so, we're going to touch on these areas with the strategies that Dr. Buse gives us.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

Lindsay, you gave us a list of the healthy habits that we know matter in migraine management. They matter for a couple reasons. The migraine brain and nervous system thrives off of routine, consistency, and balance. All things in moderation and that is true also when it comes to our eating, our hydration, exercise or movement, certainly managing the stress, and sleep. So these are really our core healthy habits for migraine management. Now, while they sound so simple, these are actually some of the most difficult things to do in our whole migraine treatment plan.

And they're difficult for all of us. We are all human. These are not easy. They take time. They take willpower. They may cost money. They are not fun. They may be uncomfortable. It's not easy always to incorporate these habits, but psychologists have come up with this acronym called SMART goals. And I'd like to offer ways we can apply this SMART goal strategy to achieving success with our healthy lifestyle habit, maintenance, and change. So SMART goals means they are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely or time based.

So let's give an example when it comes to exercise. We're going to start low and go slow. That's something I like to say in medicine having to do with when you start a medication. But let's also think about this with our goals. You don't want to start with too big a goal. And so instead of defining our goal, do something totally different saying I want to be able to speak Spanish. My goal would be for the next week, I want to use a Spanish learning app for seven minutes a day.

So, I have made it time limited. It's one week. I also said how many minutes a day? Seven. I made it very achievable. I think I can do seven. Now I may have to get an app or figure out how I'm going to start learning it and practicing. And it is also something I can measure. At the end of the week, I can say yes I did it, no I didn't do it. If I did it great. I might increase my goals for the next week, or I might stay at that same level. If I didn't, then I come back and say, okay, what went wrong? Did I not have an app? Do I not like the app? Did I forget? What else could have gone wrong? So many things.

So let's think about this in an exercise capacity. Now we're all going to be starting at different places and have different physical and time and health conditions and limitations and restrictions. You need to start where you are and think about what is kind of a small tweak or improvement that you could make in this first week or this first month to your exercise or movement goals. And little bits of exercise or movements can make a big difference for physical health and well-being. It may be something like when your smartwatch tells you it's time to stand up and stretch. Once an hour you stand up and stretch. Or if you don't have a smartwatch and you're doing this on your own, you set an alarm for once an hour that you stand up and stretch. It may be a bigger goal, like starting to walk in your neighborhood. So it may be that every night after dinner, you take a walk around a certain number of blocks. Over time you add on and make it longer.

Or there's probably people listening who are already regular exercisers. Maybe they're regular yoga practitioners, maybe they are ballroom dancers, maybe they run marathons. So their goal settings, their next levels are going to be different. So as long as this is personalized to you, think about what you would like to see achieving in your exercise or movement goals. Let's start with the first month. Break it down week by week. And in some cases, it may not even be that your first step is actually exercising. Your first step may be researching where can I exercise. Maybe you live in a cold climate. It's snowy outside or dark outside. You start looking around at your options. Maybe you ask friends and family and relatives where do they exercise, what kind of exercise do they like. Maybe it's looking into different kinds of sports, other kinds of dancing. Maybe it's something you hadn't even thought about yet. So, your first week exercise goal may actually be researching what's available to you, what's in your area, what are the costs, what's safe, what sounds interesting and fun.

And when you get to that first goal week, at the end of that first week, and you've achieved what you've achieved, I want you to stop and reward yourself. Our brain sets patterns that are rewarded, and reward means adding something positive. So it can be a self-pat on the back. It can be a something you like. Something that makes you happy, makes you feel good. Or it can be something that you take some time for yourself. There's so many ways that things can be rewarding. But you want to have some reward so that we make this brain connection, that doing this goal led to a good outcome, was a positive outcome. We want to start to really get positive feelings, positive memories, positive attachments with our goal behaviors.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I like that. Do you have any ideas, because I think a lot of people out there, are like, well, my reward would be something great to eat and I just exercised. So, what are some ideas for rewards? Because that's not something, I have to be honest, I'm not good at that myself. I'm not good at rewarding myself. So, when people ask for ideas from you, what do you say to them?

Dawn Buse, PhD:

It can be anything that feels good, makes you happy, is positive. You're right. I think we often as humans think of a food treat reward, ice cream reward. When we think about our children, our children use a lot of tokens. You and I both have school aged children. They get points, they get stickers. They get prizes. They may get money. They may get a dime. They may get a quarter. Who knows what all the rewards are. My children are both in elementary school and they get daily point rewards on their school app and they are added up at the end of the week.

So, it may be something that is a little extra time for yourself. It may be purchasing something that you've wanted. And that doesn't have to be an expensive item. Maybe there was a certain beauty product, something pretty in your home. Maybe just something when you go grocery shopping. You think, oh, how nice, it's winter, but I'm going to get the blueberries because I earned it this week. Even though they're expensive in the winter, I'm going to get them. It could be anything, or it could be hearing positive feedback. Maybe you share with your friend, your spouse, your partner, your colleague at work, and you just hear that positive feedback. Maybe seeing visually on your calendar or a chart that you put a star or a check mark, we all really respond to that. And a lot of times if you're using an app, you will see these visual markers of rewards. It may look like a medal. It may look like a trophy, it may look like a star. And we all respond to that like, yes, I did it and I accomplished something and I can see this.

So something that feels rewarding and positive establishes those neural connections that this behavior I want to do is a good thing. And chances are there could be some negativity associated in the past. Like exercise isn't fun. It's hard. It doesn't feel good. I don't have time. I can't get there. You may be undoing some neural connections where there was a negative connotation and trying to replace those with a positive reward connotation.

In addition, it's very normal that not everything's going to go as planned. In fact, planned for the unplanned. You may not achieve your full goal for the week. Maybe you did, let's go back to the learning Spanish just because it's an easy example. Maybe you didn't practice seven days that week. Maybe you practiced four days that week. Whatever it was, exercise, healthy eating, getting your sleep in, I want you to notice what you did do. Pat yourself on the back for that and adjust your goal for next week. Maybe you just started expecting too many days out of the week and it just doesn't fit in your schedule. And that's ok. And reset, recalibrate your goal for the next week so it is achievable. You want the goals to be achievable. We want to keep the positive connections in our brain and the real positive connotations with everything having to do with achieving this goal.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I don't know how old I was when I learned that a step in the right direction is such a positive thing, even if you didn't fully achieve the goal. You're going in the right direction. The day that you understand that it's such a great thing, I think. And so I love that you said that. So can you go back, we're on the

SMART goals. So, you said reward yourself. So what's the next thing we need to understand and about implementing change and being successful at it.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

Well you can build on that. So we're starting low. We're keeping it small. And as you move through the weeks or the months on this habit, go ahead and level it up, increase it, improve it if you need to. If you've hit the right stride, then then you're in the right spot. Now, in some cases you may need more help. So let's think about, well stay with exercise for a moment. Some people may have physical needs, or they haven't exercised for a while. Or due to migraine, other chronic pain, other physical needs, they may need to start with an evaluation with physical therapy. Or they may need to talk to their doctor to get started. Or they may need some kind of motivation like a personal trainer, a group, just even lessons to learn how to do whatever it is you want to do yoga, pickleball, whatever it is, whatever you're doing. You may need to start with some help.

So let's switch over to sleep. This is a situation where it might be an easy fix or tweak that we make ourselves. And I can give you some examples of those. Or it might be that your sleep is being impacted by medical or psychological or other factors which are a little bigger. So when we think about sleep, we don't always know what's going on. We may know if we wake rested most days, but we may not as well. And sleep can have so many issues. There may be environmental issues. I have children who still wake me up at night. I'm going to call that an environmental issue. Something I have no control over. And it happens more than once most of the nights. That's an issue.

I used to live in New York City. You may have loud exterior noises. New York City has fire engines and police cars and trash trucks and neighbors all night. You may have environmental. It might be too bright where you sleep. It might be too hot. It might be too cold. So just getting some of those environmental things right may be your first start.

But it can go beyond that. Women may have hormonal factors that are affecting sleep. Pregnancy, postpartum, perimenopause, menopause, sleeping different with phases of the menstrual cycle, that can be affected. As well as other medical issues. If someone snores, they may have sleep apnea. They may be waking a lot and not getting into that deep sleep. There could also be restless leg. Both sleep apnea and restless leg, as well as insomnia are comorbid with migraine. Meaning you have a greater chance of having any of those three I just listed if you have migraines. They travel together for a couple reasons. They share some etiology. They share some different common factors.

So, we look at improving sleep. It may be something you tackle on your own with changing your environment, or it may be something you actually talk to your doctor about. It may be something you talk to your primary care doctor, maybe an Ob-Gyn, or maybe even a sleep doctor who is a neurologist.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

And I think that what keeps coming to my mind as you talk is the word momentum. If it seems huge, something you can't tackle because there's all these problems with your sleep or there's all these roadblocks in the way to get to exercise, make the phone call. Call the doctor. You just got to get moving in the right direction. I feel like oftentimes that's the way it works. Once you take the first step, the second step is easier, and the third step is easier. Sometimes you just need to hear someone say that.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

You may do multiple of these things at once. You may say, oh, I probably should talk to an when about my hormones. But in the meantime, I'm going to get some room darkening shades. Maybe I'll get an eye mask I like or a noise machine that blocks out noise. Or maybe I will learn to get my kids to sleep through the night in their own bed. So, you can start on multiple fronts at once. If the goal, the healthy habit goal, is improving sleep. It may be multifaceted. But start with your first goal. I think the first goal might be investigate how's my sleep quality, start to figure out what things I can improve, what things I need to get help to improve, and start making those appointments, those phone calls, making those changes at home, that sort of thing.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Let's do a couple more examples. And if you could just repeat for everyone what the SMART goal stands for.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

SMART, S.M.A.R.T. So, it's specific, it's attainable, it's realistic, it's measurable, and it's time limited. So when we are talking about sleep, we would say, this month I will make some doctor's appointments and talk to my primary care doctor. So I'd have this month. It would also be things at the end of the month you could check off and say, yes, I did do it or I didn't and here was my challenges.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

The things that we were speaking of were going to be exercise, sleep, hydration and diet, stress management and self-care, well-being or bringing joy into your life. So there's two things I wanted to bring up. One is let's talk about one of the stress management goals. And two, I love that you brought up bringing joy into your life, because I don't think that we bring that up enough or that people think it matters.

Before we go, let's go ahead and apply the SMART goal technique to one of the stress management techniques. I'll let you choose one. But in case that's a problem for anyone listening, let's come up with one of those.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

Yes. So unfortunately, as we know, stressful events will happen and do not stop happening. Like migraine has many stressful events. Having a job has stressful events. Being a parent has stressful events. Life happens and it's very hard to get away from that. So the stress management is really how do we respond, what happens in our world, and what happens to us.

And I love the quote by John Kabat-Zinn. I often quote this: we can't stop the waves from coming, but we can learn how to surf. So stress management is that surfboard. How do we navigate over. We get knocked down 19 times, but we get up 20 times. How do we keep getting up when we are living with a chronic, unpredictable, painful illness, plus everything else that comes along with being human.

So there are as many ways to manage stress as there are people. Different things attract people differently. So everyone listening can think about what helps me calm, center, focus, soothe. There are

kind of traditional ways which would be talking to a psychologist, therapist, could be a religious counselor, could be a social worker, could be a support group.

And there some of the approaches are addressing and noticing dysfunctional ways of thinking, like catastrophizing, black and white thinking, and noticing some of our ways of thinking that increase our anxiety, increase our worries. And learning to address those in a better way so that we don't keep ourselves in a kind of psychological fight or flight state. That could be a more traditional way. And if you're going that route, there are so many options today for therapy and learning cognitive behavioral skills. There's traditional kind of in-person therapy, in person individual, or group. There's also online therapy options through text, through virtual, through groups. There's some terrific apps out there. There's quite a few ways to get there. So all sorts of things to think about for learning stress management that way. There's biofeedback. There is cognitive behavioral therapy. There are all the mindfulness space therapies, some mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness based cognitive therapy.

There also approaches like exercise and yoga which have that physical and emotional balance element. As well as more pure meditation approaches. I know that's something you like doing and have talked about before. That meditation is a positive way for you. Meditation is a wonderful goal. We know it has benefits in managing migraine. It's good for the nervous system. Helps get us out of that fight or flight response, that sympathetic activity that we all spend too much time in, balancing our nervous system back to the parasympathetic, rest and digest. That's our goal. We don't want to spend as much time unbalanced as we do. There is when it comes to meditation again, there's in person, there's learning on your own.

There are apps, there are groups, there are social media videos. There are so many options to get there if that was the goal you chose. Other things that are supportive of wellbeing, being in nature. Humans respond really well to seeing nature. The blue waves of the ocean, the blue of the sky, the blue of water, the greens of trees and grasses, all are very centering, calming, really restorative for us. It can even just being outside, breathing that clean air. And breathing, all of the breathing exercises, do you ever experience kind of just some diaphragmatic breathing, some pace breathing. Even the simple single breath that takes about 20 seconds, starts to relax the nervous system, bring you down from that fight or flight response. There are breathing apps. There are kind of guidances on social media. My website, I have breathing exercises. And it's just something that you could start to incorporate into your daily life. And there's more and more and more and more. There's there's hobbies. Some people get good energy from social connections. Some people really get their good energy from solitary, a quiet time.

There's hobbies, there's gardening, there's reading, there's dancing. There's as many hobbies as there are people. Whatever it is that brings you joy. There's spending time with pets. Animal therapy can really soothe, center people who have that love of animals. And so I would say, when it comes to stress management, your first goal is look around, see what it is that soothes and balances you personally.

And then, how am I going to bring that into my life on a regular basis? What time do I need? What equipment, what costs are involved? How do I schedule out and make that a routine for me? I think step one is kind of what is it that brings me a good sense of peace, calm, center, balance, enjoyment in life.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

We had said that we might go ahead and say what one of our goals was. And I used to meditate every day, and I have a long commute in my day now, and I had stopped for a while. And that is one of the things I want to bring back in. So that is one of my goals. And I was going to go ahead and apply the SMART goal technique to that. And that's an easy one because it is timed and etc. and you can add it in. And so I loved that example for us today.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

I don't know if that it's easy though, anything like that.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

You're right. It's not easy.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

You're living with a chronic disease. You're a working mom. These things aren't easy. You've got to make the time. You've got to carve it out. Emergencies happen. Life happens. Especially life with children and life with migraine. I hope you don't mind if I share with our listeners, but we tried to record this last week, and we missed last week because I had migraine, and my son had migraine. And then two days later, you and your son had migraine. And here we are today. And so to a viewer they might say, oh, this looks great. They're talking about this. They both have washed their hair, they look good, their lighting's good, they sound like they know what they're talking about. But viewers, this was our third attempt. Because we both had migraine happen as well as other mom work life things.

So, none of it's easy. But none of those things are failures. They're just waves. They're just the waves that keep coming. As long as you can get up again, you're succeeding, Don't let that set you back. And whether it comes to healthy eating or stopping smoking, just because a friend had one cigarette, you wouldn't say that's it. You lost it. It's over. You might as well go back to two packs a day. So. Wow. Okay. You're human. You had one setback. Get back on track and that's okay. And so, we need to be as supportive and kind with ourselves as we would be with a friend who was making a positive behavior change.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Before we go, I would really love to hear you comment on the fact that you wanted to include well-being and adding joy to your life as part of what's important on taking care of yourself with migraine. How is joy important?

Dawn Buse, PhD:

It's so good for us in so many ways as humans. It's good on a neuroendocrine type of level. Get those endorphins going. Really good for balancing our neurotransmitters, our well-being. It's good for us physically and emotionally in so many ways, and we deserve it. People who live with a chronic disease often will miss some time. So migraine strikes, you miss a day. What do you want to do when you get back up? You think, well, I'm behind on work. I got to take care of the kids. I got to clean up my house.

You think you need to go to your chores and your work. Rarely do you say, oh, well, I missed this enjoyable activity. I want to make that up.

And so a lot of times, people with a chronic disease like migraine might go right to making up their responsibilities. And those pleasant parts of life feel like a guilty pleasure. But there's no reason to feel guilty about enjoying life. Everyone deserves that enjoyment and that balance. Maybe you are out with a migraine, and you missed work, and your house is a little messy. But you want to go whatever it is you want to. Go to your belly dancing class. Go to your belly dancing class. Your dishes will still be there when you get home. Like, let's let ourselves live. Let's let ourselves enjoy. Let's be as kind to ourselves as we would be to anybody else.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I think we're guilty of this with children too. Maybe not us, but I do sometimes have to stand up for children, not even just my own, but other kids with migraine. Because people think they shouldn't be having fun, because they missed school because of a migraine.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

They missed school that day so why would they go to the birthday party or the soccer practice, or out with their friends? I agree with you and we talked about this on the podcast with migraine with children. And we know when our kiddos have a migraine and we know what migraine looks like. And once they're feeling better, we know what that looks like too. And if we always say, right after you feel better, you have to do your homework and your chores. I mean, what a kind of punishment for the end of your migraine. Let's let our kids enjoy themselves a little bit. Let us enjoy ourselves a little bit. Keep that balance, but let's enjoy life a little bit. We all deserve it.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Well, I'm really glad that I asked you that question, because that is a really great place to leave everyone with these great thoughts. It's okay to bring joy into your life even if you missed out a lot because of migraine. And take care of yourself and take care of the people around you. And focus on the good.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

And I want to say it's more than okay. I would like to prescribe that to everyone listening as their sixth healthy habit goal. That it is good for you and good for life with a chronic diseases like migraine to keep the joy going, keep your happy endorphins flowing, keep your neurotransmitters balanced. Stay part of life. It's good for your well-being. It also makes you a better caregiver and friend and family member and worker to everyone else when you've got some joy and enjoyment and balance yourself.

So, Lindsay, I'm going to offer you one extra tip for your meditation goals. You've got a SMART goal. The next thing that makes you oodles more likely to succeed at a behavior change is when someone is checking in on you. So, I'm going to be your check in partner.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

There we go.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

And next month I'm going to check in with you and say how is your meditation going. And when you know that someone's checking in with you, either you've made a partner like, okay, the two of us are going to play pickleball. We're going to go every Tuesday. Now you've got someone who's counting on you, and then Tuesday comes along and it's cold outside, or you're a little bit tired, I would think, well, Lindsay's there waiting for me to play pickleball. I have to go. So I will be your meditation goal check in partner. And you're going to say, well, Dawn is going to ask me how this is going, so I've got to stay on track. So the next thing, the next level up, is also if you could get a buddy for your healthy habit goals, you will both be more likely to succeed and stay on track.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Oh that's awesome. That's great advice. Thank you so much. And maybe we'll even do that on the podcast. People can know how well I'm doing at my meditation.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

I love that. Then you're going to have thousands of check in partners.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

There we go.

Dawn Buse, PhD:

You can't let everyone down, so you're going to keep going.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I know. Thank you so much, Dr. Buse, for coming and talking to us about SMART goals. And thank you, everyone for tuning in. And good luck to everyone and bring you some joy into your life this month and in 2025. Bye-bye everyone!