

dear residents

Fear Setting vs Goal Setting

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Dear Residents,

We set a lot of goals in life – some simple ones (procrastination notwithstanding) that are mostly under our control (clean the garage, wash the car, sort the closet, start working out, lose some weight), while others are often multistep and may involve external factors (find the right partner, publish a paper, get an NIH grant, or earn more money). Sometimes we set audacious or improbable goals (zero carbon footprint, compete in all 6 major marathons or win the lottery).

Then there are those important but hard to execute goals where fear prevents us from even taking the first step. To overcome this, Tim Ferris suggests fear setting. Watch his [TED talk](#). Tim expounds on stoicism and urges us to attempt the difficult by confronting our fears and focusing on what we can control. This quote is attributed to Seneca (the younger): *“It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare; it is because we do not dare that things are difficult.”*

If you have an important goal that is (mostly) under your control and you want to achieve it, try fear-setting. Here are the suggested steps:

1. Ask yourself – “what if I...?” Think of the decision you want to make and **define your fear**. An example – you want to pursue a fellowship in gastroenterology and your fear of not matching is too great for you to take the risk. Explore your fear and your self-doubt.
2. Now that you have defined the fear, think about how you might **prevent the worst-case scenario** from occurring. Explore the field, develop a portfolio, speak to others, reach out to mentors, apply broadly, have others assess and guide you.
3. Confront your worse-case scenario and **focus on repair**. Imagine that you don’t match despite your best preparation and efforts. How will you repair the damage? What is your back-up option? Are you prepared to reapply the following year? What will you do to improve your competitiveness? What are other specialties you might consider?
4. Still afraid? Consider the **benefits of taking action**. Think about what might go well. What new skills would you have learned even if you had partial success (matched in a less desirable program). Or if you had no success at all (unmatched), how did you learn and grow from the process?
5. List the **consequences of inaction**. If you don’t apply, you have no chance of matching – that’s pretty self-explanatory. Or you sought something safer regretted it later.

My high school in Karachi prided itself on placing almost everyone in colleges in the US or UK. I was one of 2 pre-med hopefuls. Most of my classmates were headed to business or liberal arts colleges. Most of them secured college admissions in the US or UK. I knew that admission to medical school in the US would require 4 years of college. I wanted to get to medical school faster. I applied to 17 medical schools in the UK – not one interview was offered. I was crushed. My back up option didn't seem that attractive at the time – attending medical school in Karachi. But I did that and at graduation, ventured another long shot by taking the equivalent of the USMLE exams (The [FMGEMS](#) was offered at the time). The pass rate was low. But I remained focused and passed the exam and was overjoyed when I matched in internal Medicine in Houston. I had confronted the fear of not passing and did have a backup plan - to take the UK exam (the [PLAB](#)) and seek training there. And if that too would fail, I would apply for post-graduate education in Karachi.

Taking action helped me succeed. I had got over my initial disappointment of not attending medical school in the UK and made the most of medical school in Karachi. I overcame the fear of a second longshot failure and succeeded by preparing well, asking for advice and by visualizing and accepting that I may not achieve my preferred goals.

Fear setting provides clarity and permits you to conquer your fears. You can mitigate worst-case scenarios. If you don't take risks, it could mean that you fail to fulfil your potential.

I know that it is daunting to prepare for fellowship season. And that it has been especially hard with the COVID years. Moving forward, we will further enhance our fellowship mentoring efforts. The GI division is very keen to get us started – so stay tuned. We will tackle H/O, Cards and others in due course.

I believe in your potential and will help you achieve your goals.



Photo by [Tengyart](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Warm regards,
Dino Kazi