

## 2.13 Make And Formalize Agreements

Keep track of your written and oral agreements—with yourself or others.

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In daily life, we frequently make ambiguous or unspoken agreements, which we then interpret based on our individual memory and understanding. This understanding may or may not match the perception of other parties. Without a formal record, this may lead to frustration and conflict as two (or more) people have a different understanding of what has been discussed. One solution is to record your agreements, preventing future grievances and arguments.

Not every agreement involves other people. Making agreements with yourself is a way to guide your behavior in specific situations. For example, let's say you agree—for yourself—only to eat ice cream once a week. When you're at the ice cream shop and tempted to order a cone, your agreement will act like an inner parent, anchoring you and assisting you in making the choice your higher self would make.

1

- Formalizing agreements provides all parties with a clear understanding of expectations, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings.
- Proactively prevents future grievances and arguments, which fosters smoother interactions and relationships.
- Agreements, even with oneself, act as a valuable behavioral framework, encouraging self-discipline and intentional decision-making.

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- Some people may perceive formalizing agreements as unnecessary or cumbersome.
- Ensuring total consistency and preventing differing interpretations can be challenging, potentially leading to long and tedious agreements.

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The first step to formalizing agreements is to ask for the consent of everyone involved. An agreement won't hold if anyone feels that they didn't enter into it willingly. Some people find the idea of entering into formal agreements in a relationship context off-putting. They may feel constrained or perceive it as work. If this is the case, be sure to take the preferences of others into account. Don't be so blinded by enthusiasm for this tool that you railroad others into participation. Once everyone is comfortable, the next step is to negotiate the terms of the agreement. Who will do what? When? In what circumstances?

It's important, too, to check that everyone understands the agreement to mean the same thing. If there's ambiguity, that can lead to differing interpretations and potential conflict further down the line. Once you have a clear agreement in place, document it using whatever method works best for you. This can be pen and paper, a note on your phone, or anything else you prefer. For easy reference, maintain a centralized record in a shared document or folder. Keep your agreements as

concise as possible while ensuring they cover relevant circumstances.

To make your agreements airtight, consider including specific terms, such as time frames or other conditions, that might affect their validity. One way to do this is to pursue SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) goals. Constructing your agreement using this framework can help you ensure that your agreement is robust. That said, try not to be too rigid. Creating an agreement shouldn't feel like a torturous experience—hopefully it can even be fun.

To give you an idea of how this might work, here's an example of an agreement in practice:

- “I can cancel our meetings up to forty-eight hours in advance with no penalty. If I cancel with less than forty-eight hours' notice, I will pay for the session.”

This is clear, concise, and meets the SMART criteria.

In challenging situations, you could agree to disagree for a while, and perhaps generate a set timeframe for revisiting the topic, in the hope that you will be able to reach a more complete settlement at a later date.

You can also renegotiate agreements as circumstances or relationships evolve. Some people fear that if they agree to something, they will be bound by it on a permanent basis. For these people, knowing they will have a chance to renegotiate can be an enormous relief. It may even be the difference between engaging with this process and resisting it. Others may respond with anxiety because they like the certainty of knowing where they stand. To make this tool successful, you'll need to be aware of your own personality and the other parties' and craft the agreement accordingly.

Finally, know that this tool isn't limited to interactions with others; it's just as powerful for personal development. Whenever you want a formalized framework to guide your behavior or support your progress toward personal goals, you can craft agreements with yourself. And, just as you do with others, you can agree to disagree for a while, come back to them later, or renegotiate agreements that no longer work for you.

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1. SMART Goals: <https://forbes.com/advisor/business/smart-goals/>.
  2. Keeping Agreements with Yourself: <https://mclarencoaching.com/keeping-agreements-with-yourself/>.
  3. Agreements in Relationships: <https://npr.org/2021/08/01/1022875293/relationship-contracts-couples-useful-advice-tips>.
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