Simple Changes, Big Rewards

Getting started

Making major changes in lifestyle habits isn't easy. If it were, we wouldn't need New Year's resolutions. But you can learn how to make changes that last, set realistic goals, and sidestep pitfalls that commonly trip people up. This report will show you how.

Making lasting changes

When you're ready to brush your teeth, you don't hunt everywhere for your toothbrush, do you? Quite possibly, you could find it with your eyes shut because you reach for it every day. That's a habit.

We know from experience that creating new habits takes time and energy. Not much solid scientific evidence tells us exactly how long it may take, however. A preliminary study of 96 participants reporting daily for 12 weeks on new eating, drinking, or activity behaviors they had adopted found it took 18 to 254 days before the action became automatic—that is, a habit. The average was 66 days. Writing in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* and in subsequent interviews, the researchers noted that missing one opportunity to perform the behavior didn't interfere with creating a habit, although frequent inconsistency did prevent success. Perseverance was important.

Though a new behavior won't become automatic overnight, you may enjoy some of its benefits fairly quickly. Then, as you start to put it into practice—by taking walks regularly, for example, or engaging in stress-soothing practices frequently—you'll find you won't feel quite right if you stop. That's a great incentive to continue. So, keep nudging yourself in the direction you'd like to go. And try the following tips to help you create long-lasting change.
Dream big. Audacious goals are compelling. Want to compete in a marathon or triathlon? Lose 50 pounds or just enough to fit into clothes you once loved? With perseverance, encouragement, and support, you can do it. An ambitious aim often inspires others around you. Many will cheer you on. Some will be happy to help in practical ways, such as by training with you or taking on tasks you normally handle in order to free up your time.

Now think tiny. Break big dreams into small steps. Small steps move you forward to your ultimate goal and also build your confidence to tackle-and succeed at-more difficult tasks. So look for surefire bets. Don't disdain easy choices. Just break hard jobs down into smaller line items, and enjoy breezing through the easy tasks first (see “Breaking it down,” for examples).

Figure out why you haven't made this change already. Until you grasp why you're sticking like a burr to old habits and routines, it may be hard to muster enough energy and will to take a hard turn toward change. Unhealthy behaviors like overeating and smoking have immediate, pleasurable payoffs, but they also have costs. So when you're considering a change, take time to think it through (see Table 1). You boost your chance of success when the balance of pluses and minuses tips enough to make adopting a new behavior more attractive than standing in place. Engaging in enjoyable aspects of an unhealthy behavior, without the behavior itself, helps too. For example, if you enjoy taking a break while having a smoke, take the break and enjoy it, but use that time to do something healthier like going for a walk around the block or having a quick chat with a colleague instead of smoking. Otherwise, you're working against a headwind and are less likely to experience lasting success.

Table 1: Is a change worthwhile?

Sketch out the pros and cons of the change you'd like to focus on. But in a twist on a typical list of pluses and minuses, include the reasons you've been sticking with the status quo. Here we sketch out a simple analysis, using smoking as an example. You can try something similar for each of the changes you would like to make.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why I like smoking</th>
<th>Why I'd like to quit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I get to go outside.</td>
<td>• I'll save a lot of money and be able to spend more on things I enjoy or need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I get to take a break at work or at home.</td>
<td>• My breath will smell better, and my teeth will be whiter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nicotine wakes me up or calms me down.</td>
<td>• My senses of taste and smell will come back.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I enjoy the camaraderie with other smokers-it's like belonging to a club.</td>
<td>• My body will start recovering right away. According to the American Cancer Society, in just 20 minutes, my heart rate and blood pressure will drop; in two weeks to three months, my circulation and lung function will improve; in one to nine months, I'll cough less; and a year after quitting, I'll cut my risk for heart disease by half.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• I'll cut my risk for dying from lung cancer in half in 10 years; my risks for other cancers will drop, too.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Costs of smoking | Costs of Quitting
Smoking causes lung cancer, and contributes to heart disease, stroke, and many other kinds of cancer, too.

- My skin, hair, and clothes smell.
- I know smoking worsens wrinkles.
- I can't taste food well.
- I cough a lot.
- I don't have much endurance—it's hard to bike with my kids or walk uphill or even upstairs without feeling out of breath.
- I don't have a lot of energy.
- I'm spending way too much money on cigarettes (at $6 or more a pack, one pack a day costs at least $2,190 a year).

- I'm worried that I'll gain weight.
- Nicotine withdrawal will make me feel grouchy and awful.
- I'll get nervous and won't be able to calm myself with a cigarette.
- I'll miss the companionship of my smoking buddies.

**Make a commitment.** Make yourself accountable through a written or verbal promise to people you don't want to let down. That will encourage you to slog through tough spots. You can make a less public promise to your partner or child, a teacher, doctor, boss, or friends. Want more support? Post your pledge on Facebook, Tweet it to your followers, or seek out folks with like-minded goals online (see "Resources").

**Give yourself a medal.** Don't wait to call yourself a winner until you've pounded through the last mile of your big dream marathon or lost every unwanted ounce. Health changes are often incremental. Encourage yourself to keep at it by pausing to acknowledge success as you tick off small and big steps en route to a goal. Blast your favorite tune each time you reach 5,000 steps. Get a pat on the back from your coach or spouse. Ask family and friends to cheer you on. Look for an online support group. Or download the "Attaboy" app for your smartphone or tablet to enjoy a stream of compliments whenever you need to hear it.

**Learn from the past.** Any time you fail to make a change, consider it a step toward your goal. Why? Because each sincere attempt represents a lesson learned. When you hit a snag, take a moment to think about what did and didn’t work. Maybe you took on too big a challenge? If so, scale back to a less ambitious challenge, or break the big one into tinier steps (see "Breaking it down"). If nailing down 30 consecutive minutes to exercise never seems to work on busy days, break that down by aiming for three 10-minute walks—one before work, one during lunch, one after work—or a 20-minute walk at lunch plus a 10-minute mix of marching, stair climbing, and jumping rope or similar activities slipped into your TV viewing schedule.

**Give thanks for what you accomplish.** Forget perfection. Set your sights on just finishing that marathon, not on placing first. If you compete to complete, you'll be a winner even if you wind up walking as much as you run. With exercise—as with so many other goals—you'll benefit even when doing less than you'd like to do. Any activity is better than none. If your goal for Tuesday is a vigorous 30-minute walk, but you only squeeze in 10 minutes, feel grateful for that. It's something. Maybe tomorrow will be better.

**Set a SMART goal**

Experts say efforts to change are more successful if they are SMART—that is, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-based. So as you're deciding on a change, make sure it can pass the SMART test:

S-Set a very specific goal. I will add one fruit serving—that's half a cup, chopped—to my current daily
diet.

**M-Find a way to measure progress.** I will log my efforts each day on my calendar.

**A-Make sure it's achievable.** Be sure you're physically capable of safely accomplishing your goal. If not, aim for a smaller goal.

**R-Be sure it's realistic.** It may seem counterintuitive, but choosing the change you most need to make—let's say, quitting smoking or losing weight—isn't as successful as choosing the change you're most confident you'll be able to make. Focus on sure bets, such as eating an additional serving of fruit every day rather than overhauling your diet at once: if you picture a 10-point scale of confidence in achieving your goal, where 1 equals no confidence and 10 equals 100% certainty, you should land in the 7-to-10 zone.

**T-Set time commitments.** Pick a date and time to start—Wednesday at breakfast, I'll add frozen blueberries to cereal—and regular check-in dates: I'll check my log every week and decide if I should make any changes in my routines to succeed (see "Learn from the past"). When setting commitments, outside deadlines can be really helpful. Signing up for a charity run or spring triathlon on a certain date prods you to get a training program under way.

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**Getting back on track**

Uh, oh. Have you veered off course? Let us help you get back on track. First, try a few easy fixes. Think about whether you need to tweak your plan a bit by figuring out what went wrong and plotting a path around the problem. Too wrung out by work and home life to fit in 30 minutes of exercise on a weekday? Try writing three 10-minute bouts into your schedule (be specific) and checking off each one you complete:

6:40-6:50 a.m.: March in place and do jumping jacks and squat shuffles before showering.

1:45-1:55 p.m.: Walk after lunch with Dave.

7:30-7:40 p.m.: Take the dog for a walk after dinner.

Sometimes, simple fixes aren't sufficient. You've gotten so far off track you can't imagine bushwhacking your way back. So let's prepare for that day. While you're feeling upbeat about the change you're trying to make, write down what got you to this point. Reading this statement later when you've been derailed can be inspiring, encouraging you to try again. You might write something like this:

*I made a commitment to my health by planning to exercise 30 minutes a day, three days a week. This is my first step en route to a bigger goal: two-and-a-half hours of exercise a week. I want to do it because I feel better, my back pain improves, and I have more energy when I exercise regularly.*

Then write down five steps that will help you get back on track when you relapse. For example:

*I'll start again tomorrow.*

*I'll build bursts of activity into my day (see the "Easy" choices in the "Stick to exercise" section).*

*I'll call Kaye and Molly for support and see if one of them can join me in a walk, or babysit while I work out.*

*I'll check out YouTube for exercise videos or buy an exercise DVD to work out at home when the weather is bad.*

*I'll try mixing in new activities once a week so I won't get bored: boxing, a Latin dance class, biking,***
tennis, hula hooping, jumping rope, a trampoline workout, snowshoeing, or cross-country skiing.

Put this paper in an envelope, seal it, and put it in your favorite hiding spot-one you'll remember, not a spot where it will stay hidden forever. Dig it out when needed.

What if these efforts don’t work?

Try these additional strategies:

- Keep brainstorming about what might help. Talk it over with a partner or friend. What’s derailing you? Rain, cold, humidity, or gloom of night? Bored by repeating the same routine? No energy by the end of the day? Not enough encouragement or support? Lack of equipment? Now consider solutions beyond those on your relapse list. What could you do differently to shift back on track?
- Break down the step you’ve been trying to take or set the bar a little lower so that it’s possible to succeed. You can step it up again once you meet with success.
- Consider other routes that might help you move toward your bigger goal. For example, flip to “Stick to exercise” to see if another selection from the six choices we offer appeals to you.
- Shift your sights to an entirely different goal. Maybe you’re just not ready to make this change. That doesn’t mean that you’re not ready to make any change. Rethink your dreams and pick the surefire bet.

Sidestepping pitfalls

What trips people up when they try to make healthy changes? And how can you learn to be nimble enough to sidestep pitfalls? These tips can help.

Always launch change with a plan. Map out the journey you're embarking upon. It's tempting to skip straight to the action, especially when you're feeling inspired to make a change. By winging it, though, you may ignore important issues, such as why you do-and don't-want to make this change. Make a commitment based on that knowledge, then plan a path of small steps that lead to your ultimate goal.

Set off at a reasonable pace. Rushing change rarely works. Few of us are designed to go from zero to 60. In the exercise world, you set yourself up for injuries; in the diet world, you get sick of nibbling only celery sticks and raw cabbage, and head for the chocolate cake. Let small, steady changes help you achieve what you hope to do.

Envision a happy outcome. Choose the carrot, not the stick. Rather than sternly telling yourself "I should be meditating every day" or blaming yourself for failing, try saying aloud "I feel calmer and happier when I meditate regularly." Reminding yourself why a change is worthwhile can help you over rough spots.

Expect lapses. Lapses are so normal, experts actually write this into the stages of change. Embrace lapses as part of the process, then brainstorm solutions to the challenges that derailed you. If necessary, whip out your plan to maneuver around lapses (see "Getting back on track"). And try, try again.

Live in the gray zone. Give up on all-or-nothing thinking. It's not helpful to live in a black-and-white world that dictates "I am good and am following my diet" or "I ate a fat-laden meal at lunch, so I'm doing a bad job on my diet and might as well eat anything I want." Even if you treated yourself to a double scoop of ice cream, then later enjoyed an unplanned bedtime snack, then forgot to pack a healthy lunch the next day, try not to let slipups snowball to the point where you throw up your hands and declare all of your efforts a complete loss. Realize that perfection isn't possible. Just take a deep breath, smile, and get back on track at the next opportunity.
Accept full responsibility for making the change. Personal responsibility is essential for lasting change. Don't expect someone else to act as food police, or push you out the door on days when you just don't feel like taking a walk. Again, remember why this change matters in your life.

Source: Faculty of Harvard Medical School