

A guide to creating lasting habits

No one said it was easy to change human behaviour. Habits are difficult to break, and difficult to implement. Wouldn't it be great if going for a jog every morning, drinking eight glasses of water a day, or meditating for 15 minutes during your lunch break came as automatically as brushing your teeth? But they don't. Strongly cemented habits, like brushing your teeth, are so common they often go unnoticed. So then, how do you create new habits that are just as natural and easy? The answer is that it takes work, dedication, and time.

There is a popularly held myth that it takes just 21 days to create a new habit. However, the truth is it often takes, much, much longer than that. But don't let the time it takes get you down; here are some ways to build lasting habits into your daily life:

- 1. Start small.** To get started with your new habit, break it down into smaller habits that are so miniscule that they are almost difficult *not* to achieve. If you want to run for thirty minutes a day, start by running just five minutes a day. If you want to meditate for ten minutes, start with just one minute. These small goals are so easy that you don't need much motivation to work them into your routine. Then, once you've got the small bits recurring regularly, you can increase them gradually until you're where you wanted to be.
- 2. Work with a buddy.** Having a witness to your objectives is a great way to increase the likelihood of achieving them. If you live with a spouse or a roommate, maybe both of you together can decide that you will eat vegetables at every meal, or do ten minutes of yoga before dinner. This way, if one of you is thinking of skipping it, you can hitch a ride to the motivation of the other to lift you out of that slump.
- 3. Attach new habits to existing habits.** It can be easier to remember to do something new if it is closely attached to something old. Take your vitamins and supplements when you brush your teeth in the morning, or do your pushups right before you take a shower. These "anchors" will help you bring your new habits into sync with existing ones.
- 4. Track your progress.** Using a paper calendar or an app, keep track of how often you manage to follow through on the habits you set out to form. Having a tangible, visual record of your efforts is a good way to move them from the abstract to the concrete.
- 5. Keep it up.** You are sure to trip up and miss a day or two, especially in the beginning. Don't let these small defeats snowball into big ones, after missing a day, continue the next day exactly where you left off.

Though it will probably take more than just 21 days, it is possible to create good habits that last. Give it time and effort, and eventually you will be doing things routinely that you never used to do even occasionally.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at 1 800 387-4765 or visit workhealthlife.com.

Understanding and setting SMART goals

New Year's Resolutions - most of us make them, few of us seem able to keep them. This time of year is ripe for hope and full of opportunity; we see it as a moment to look back on the year and resolve to change our behaviours. This usually means getting rid of what isn't working, and adding in that which will help us move closer towards who we would like to be.

One reason many of us don't continue with our resolutions is they are just too vague. Goals like "work out more", "eat better" or "be more grateful" are likely to fail, because no one really knows exactly what they mean.

Thankfully, there is a tested system for setting goals that are much more likely to be met. SMART goals are those that are: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. Below we'll break down each of these criteria, setting you up to make resolutions that you'll be able to follow through on.

Specific

A goal that is specific is more likely to be met than a goal that is general. For example, the general goal "be more grateful" could be made specific by changing it to "write down one thing I am thankful for before bed each night". To test if a goal is specific, ask yourself the five w-questions: *Who* is involved? *What* am I trying to accomplish? *Where* will this take place? *When* will I fit this goal into my day? And, *why* do I want to achieve this.

Measurable

Measurable goals are goals that you can quantify. This means including target dates and units of measurement in your goals. "Lose weight" is replaced by "lose 10lbs by March 1st". Goals can be made measurable by asking "how much?", "how often?", or "how many?" These measurements will mean you can track your progress and stay motivated.

Attainable and Realistic

It may seem obvious, but to be attainable, goals need to be, well, attainable. Don't set yourself up for failure by setting goals that you cannot or are not willing to achieve. This does not mean you need to set the bar low, only that you need to be honest with yourself about what you are capable of doing in the time frame you have set, and how much energy you're willing to put into your goal.

Timely

To reach your goals, you need to place them within a time frame. If you tell yourself you will quit smoking, but don't set a date, that goal will end up getting pushed further and further into the future, until it's so far off that it doesn't exist. Set dates to give yourself an external pressure that will help you work towards your goals.

Once you have a resolution or goal that meets all these criteria, tell someone about it! This can mean simply telling your best friend or your spouse what you intend to do, or finding someone with whom to join forces and work towards the same goal together. Letting others know about your SMART goal will make you more accountable, and much more likely to achieve it.

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