

LOOKING TO MAKE A CHANGE IN YOUR LIFE?

Habit change can be difficult but a few important steps can help you succeed.

When we form a habit, neural pathways are created, strengthened, and solidified over time. This process allows us to automate our behavior such that we are literally able to do things without thinking about them. This can be useful when we are talking about behavior that supports well-being and performance, but detrimental when it comes to behaviors that compromise our health and effectiveness. Whether you are trying to establish a habit that will support your well-being or “break a bad habit”, the following simple steps can help.

HOW:



Create a sense of urgency around change:

- what are the benefits of changing?
- what are the drawbacks of maintaining the status quo?



Set yourself up for success:

- start small - don't try to take on too many changes at once or set unrealistic goals
- make sure you are in a good place to make changes - it is difficult to change habits when we are depleted (e.g., not getting enough sleep), or experiencing other significant life changes (e.g., change of job, move)
- write down the habit you're going to change and your new habit
- leverage the power of social support by telling others that you are changing your behavior
- modify your environment to support the kinds of changes you want to make
- prepare for challenges like time pressure, stress, difficult people, your triggers



Be kind to yourself:

- changing habits take time and patience
- when you experience a set-back or challenge, be kind to yourself
- research demonstrates being kind versus critical is more motivating and enhances your ability to get back on track with your new behavior

IDENTIFY AND DISRUPT YOUR HABIT LOOP



CUE:

What triggers your behavior/habit?



HABIT:

What do you do?



REWARD:

What do you get from engaging in this behavior?



Harness the power of the habit loop:

- new habits that we want to enact can replace old habits that don't serve us
- examples include exercising instead of sleeping in, focusing on your work instead of surfing the Internet, and choosing healthier menu options
- overriding old habits takes effort, but is less effortful than starting an entirely new habit loop



Use mindfulness to guide the process

Using mindfulness to pay attention to our feelings, environment, and reactions can help us identify and describe our existing habit loops. Until we understand what cue triggers a behavior, and what reward sustains that behavior, it is difficult to change our habits.

When you feel the urge to engage in a behavior you're trying to break or change, consider: what has just happened?

What is motivating me to want to engage in this behavior? What do I expect will happen as a result? Use this awareness as an opportunity to examine your behavior, and, perhaps, choose to engage in a more healthy or productive action instead.



The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new.

— Socrates

45% of our behavior each day is habitual, meaning it's not done with awareness or intent

A mindfulness-based approach to habit change can improve the quality of these decisions.