

Learning About Changing a Habit by Setting Goals



How can you change a habit?

If you've decided to change a habit—whether it's quitting smoking, lowering your blood pressure, becoming more active, or doing something else to improve your health—congratulations! Making that decision is the first step toward making a change.

What happens next? Have a reason. Set goals you can reach. Prepare for slip-ups. And get support.

What's your reason?

Your reason for wanting to change a habit is really important. Maybe you want to quit smoking so that you can avoid future health problems. Or maybe you want to eat a healthier diet so you can lose weight. If you have high blood pressure, your reason may be clear: to lower your blood pressure. Maybe you smoke and want to save money on cigarettes.

You need to feel ready to make a change. If you don't feel ready now, that's okay. You can still be thinking and planning. When you truly want to make changes, you're ready for the next step.

It's not easy to change habits—but you can do it. Taking the time to really think about what will motivate or inspire you will help you reach your goals.

How do you set goals?

Setting goals can help a lot when you're trying to make a healthy change.

- **Focus on small goals.** This will help you reach larger goals over time. With smaller goals, you'll have success more often, which will help you stay with it. For example, your large goal may be to lose 20 pounds. Your small goal could be to lose 5.
- **Write down your goals.** This will help you remember, and you'll have a clearer idea of what you want to achieve. Use a journal or notebook to record your goals. Hang up your plan where you will see it often as a reminder of what you're trying to do.

- **Make your goals specific.** Specific goals help you measure your progress. For example, setting a goal to eat one extra serving of vegetables a day is better than a general goal to "eat more vegetables."
- **Focus on one goal at a time.** By doing this, you're less likely to feel overwhelmed and then give up.
- **When you reach a goal, reward yourself.** Celebrate your new behavior and success for several days, and then think about setting your next goal.

How can you prepare for slip-ups?

It's perfectly normal to try to change a habit, go along fine for a while, and then have a setback. Lots of people try and try again before they reach their goals.

What are the things that might cause a setback for you? If you have tried to change a habit before, think about what helped you and what got in your way.

By thinking about these barriers now, you can plan ahead for how to deal with them if they happen.

There will be times when you slip up and don't make your goal for the week. When that happens, don't get mad at yourself. Learn from the experience. Ask yourself what got in the way of reaching your goal. Positive thinking goes a long way when you're making lifestyle changes.

How can you get support?

- **Get a partner.** It's motivating to know that someone is trying to make the same change that you're making, like being more active or changing your eating habits. You have someone who is counting on you to help them succeed. That person can also remind you how far you've come.
- **Get friends and family involved.** They can exercise with you. Or they can encourage you by saying how they admire what you are doing. Family members can join you in your healthy eating efforts. Don't be afraid to tell family and friends that their encouragement makes a big difference to you.
- **Join a class or support group.** People in these groups often have some of the same barriers you have. They can give you support when you don't feel like staying with your plan. They can boost your morale when you need a lift. You'll also find a number of online support groups.
- **Encourage yourself.** When you feel like giving up, don't waste energy feeling bad about yourself. Remember your reason for wanting to change, think about the progress you've made, and give yourself a pep talk and a pat on the back.
- **Get professional help.** A dietitian can help you make your diet healthier while still allowing you to eat foods that you enjoy. A trainer or physical therapist can help design an exercise program that is fun and easy to stay on. A counselor, a social worker, or your doctor can help you overcome hurdles, reduce stress, or quit smoking.

Where can you learn more?

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