

CREATING HABITS THAT STICK



dietflex

LOZ life

Creating a new habit is the easiest thing in the world. All you need to do is repeat the same action at the same time each day for days on end, preferably with as little thought as possible. Sounds easy.

Every habit is the result of many small decisions over time. The old habits you want to ditch were created in this way, so it makes sense that you'll need to use the same approach to develop new habits. The old habits were, in many cases, accidental while the new habits will now need to be deliberate.

We've all heard of the success stories: "Jenny loses 50kg", "Martha's diabetes medication is no longer needed" or "Sally lost her depression along with her weight".

These dramatic transformations are what we want to hear about, but we don't hear about the hard work the person put in to achieving their success. So what we're left with is the idea that the goal is possible but no idea of how to make it happen for ourselves. We're inspired and motivated so we go all out to make it happen, but we haven't spent the time needed to develop the new habits that will help us get there.

THE GOAL IS NOT THE FOCUS

Becoming the person you want to become is about the daily processes you follow and not the ultimate weight or fitness level or health you want. Your current weight, fitness and health is the result of your habits to date. It makes sense that to create a different weight and state of health, you need to create a different set of habits. In creating a new, healthy habit it takes focus and planning to initiate the new behaviour, and then repeat it often enough that you no longer need to think about it. Despite motivation, desire and solid goals, sometimes it's hard to stick to the new habit.

MAKING NEW HABITS STICK

It might surprise you to know that there is a simple threestep pattern that every habit follows.

1. Cue – the trigger that initiates the behaviour
2. Routine – the behaviour itself, or the action you take
3. Reward – the benefit you gain from doing the behaviour

Let's look at these steps in developing a habit, for example remembering to take lunch to work:

Step 1: Write a note "Prepare lunch" and stick it on the fridge. (Cue)

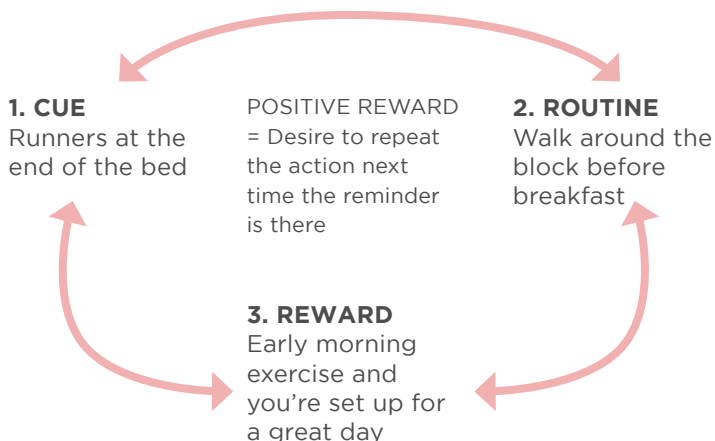
Step 2: When going to the fridge to prepare dinner, also get food out for tomorrow's lunch. This prompts you to grab a lunch-box and cut up your salad, and to grab a can of salmon. (Routine)

Step 3: In the morning, you go to the fridge for cream for your coffee, and bacon and mushrooms and spinach for the fry-pan, see the note and take your lunch out of the fridge. Leave it with your bag and take it to work ready to enjoy at lunchtime. (Reward)

Result: Your body feels great after eating a good lunch, your brain feels great because you did something positive and followed through with your good intentions, and your weight heads in the direction you want. This positive reward forms a positive feedback loop that reinforces the repetition of the new habit.

Follow this three-step cycle often enough and you stop thinking about it. It's now truly a habit.

Here's an exercise example:



DON'T RELY ON MOTIVATION

It's easy to do something new when you're motivated. That's what happens when most people start a new program. The problem is that motivation is variable: sometimes it's high and other times not. If motivation is all that's helping you create a habit (which is a consistent behaviour), then it's logical that when motivation is low – you're tired, angry, frustrated, busy – you'll forget about the new habit you're trying to create. Don't use something variable to create something consistent.

Link the cue for your new habit with something you already do. The example earlier linked preparing lunch with making dinner. It might be that you already drive past the gym on your way home from work, so keeping your exercise gear in the car links the current habit to the new cue.

Whatever you decide, make the new cue so easy that you can't say no.

START SMALL

Remember that lasting change is the result of daily habits, not magical transformations. Start small. The result is less important than becoming the sort of person who sticks to your new behaviours. Once these new behaviours are habits, you can then set about improving your performance and becoming better at what you're doing.

START SMALL?

Perhaps this is as small as packing protein powder into little baggies to take to work. It might be as small as slipping on your runners and walking around the lounge-room.

What could you do today to start a new habit?

CELEBRATE

There's no point in leaving your celebration or rewards until you've achieved your absolute goal. Congratulate yourself for the small things with positive self-talk. If this is a foreign concept to you, research has shown that the reward is an important part of creating a habit. Catch yourself doing things right – and saying "Well done" or "Success!" or whatever is meaningful for you – as long as it is positive.

IDENTITY-BASED HABITS

Complete this sentence: "I'm the sort of person who" _____

Whatever you said to complete that sentence is something you believe of yourself, and forms part of who you are – your identity.

In order to believe a new identity, you need to prove it to yourself. Think about the identity of someone who has the weight, fitness and health that you'd like to achieve. Who are they? What do they do? What exercise do they do? How do they eat?

Now complete this sentence: “A person who has glowing health and weighs kg does this:

”

“

As an example, a slim, fit person may be known to their friends as the type of person who eats well and exercises regularly. A professional athlete may be known as someone who is focussed and never misses a workout. A woman who is always well-presented is known as someone who takes pride in her appearance.

MAKING THE CHANGE

Compare your current identity with that of the person you'd like to become. Think about the small steps you can start taking now to make this change. It may be that you want to be the sort of person who exercises regularly. Use a pedometer and start with only 500 steps per day. Record the number of steps you take each day, making sure that you take at least 10 steps a day more than the previous day.

Perhaps you want to be the sort of person who eats well. It's OK if you make mistakes as long as you acknowledge them. Reward yourself for all the successes you have, which will almost certainly out-number the mistakes.

Your new habits need to be a series of actions that build on each other. The first step is to develop a very small habit that becomes so ingrained that you don't even need to think about it. An example might be to keep a filled water bottle with you to avoid dehydration.

DREAM BIG BUT START SMALL

If you focus on the big picture, you can become obsessed by the goal rather than the habits and lifestyle that make the goal a reality.

Losing 20kg might be the goal, but making sure you've got some protein in each meal might be a new lifestyle.

Your past approaches to losing weight may have been to dive in at the deep end and try to create massive changes all at once. The new approach might be to paddle in the shallows, gradually wading in deeper and deeper until you can swim without really noticing. All this can happen whether you're motivated or not.

Daily habits are the tiny routines that are repeated day in, day out. They are what make the big dreams a reality. Dream big but start small.

KEYSTONE HABITS

Keystone habits are the routines that naturally pull the rest of our life into line. An example might be your morning routine: hit the snooze button, wake again in a panic, fly out of bed and into the shower, dash out the door, stop at Maccas for coffee... It doesn't sound like a good start to a positive day.

Instead, think about what you can change so that your day starts on a more positive, less frantic note. Go to bed earlier at night. This might lead to being able to have a morning walk, meditation, and eating breakfast.

Changing this one thing then signals the rest. It's not reliant on motivation. This keystone habit is not negotiable, as long as it's in accordance with the longterm habits you want to create.

If it seems impossible to complete your activity for that day, find a way to make it happen. Let's use walking in the morning as an example. It's raining so put on a jacket and carry an umbrella; there's lightning so walk laps of your house,

go up and down the stairs, do sit-ups and squats instead; it's cold so wear a hat and gloves along with a warm jacket, then walk faster!

BUT I DON'T HAVE TIME

"I don't have the time" really means "I haven't got this high on my list of priorities".

Structure your time and choices so that you can get what you want done. Is watching a particular TV program more important than exercising? If it is, could you record it to watch later so that you can fit in lunch preparation for the next day?

What if you run out of time? Stick to the schedule but reduce the scope. Eg You slept in and couldn't do your normal 30 minute walk. Instead, do 20 push-ups - you don't even need to get out of your pyjamas to do this, and it will take less than 1 minute. It's not ideal, but better than nothing. No excuses!

CALENDAR

Set a small goal that is the same every day, and just do it! No excuses, no argument, no matter what. Don't focus on the result; do focus on not breaking the cycle. Record the completion of that activity every day on a big calendar - cross it off in red so over time it is really clear that you've been successful.

CONDITIONS WILL NEVER BE PERFECT

Don't wait until conditions are perfect because they never will be. Change can be hard. Sometimes you'll take two steps forward and one step back. This is normal, so anticipate it and develop a plan for getting back on track quickly. Don't beat yourself up. Do say "Oh well, it happened and now I'm back on track. I'm the sort of person who eats and exercises well so now I'm going to prove it."

TRY ONE OF THESE WEEKLY CHALLENGES:

- Replace soft drinks and/or juice with water.
- Reduce coffee to 2 per day.
- Have an alcohol-free week.

NOTES
