



Creating Real and Effective Behaviour Change

Do you often find yourself struggling to change your habits, even when willing and determined to reach your goals? If you do, you are not alone.

Humans are creatures of habit, meaning that most of our behaviour is guided by habits. Habitual behaviour largely occurs automatically, without much conscious control. Such behaviour is formed through repetitive action and can be formed intentionally and unintentionally. This means that even though old habits can be difficult to shake, it is possible to consciously change them and form newer habits that might serve us better. However, making a resolution to change and setting goals towards that change is much easier than actually changing and sticking with the change long-term. Creating real and lasting behaviour change requires time and effort, and not just a willingness, but also a readiness and ability to change. This resource provides evidence-based tips on how to make changes you can stick with.

Focus on one behaviour change goal at a time. It can become very tempting to try and make multiple changes at a time. However, if you try to change everything all at once, you are likely to get overwhelmed and fall back into old habits. If you would like to create sustainable and long-lasting change, focus on one goal at a time and break that goal into small, clear, measurable, and manageable steps. Once you have made the change into a habit, you can then focus on your next goal.

Make sure your goal is attainable. We are unlikely to try what we think we cannot do, so make sure that your goal is realistic and not overambitious. To help you determine this, you can ask yourself the following questions: How achievable is this goal? What am I expecting to gain? What might prevent me from reaching my goal? What resources and skills might I need, and do I currently possess them? How much control do I have over what I am trying to change? For example, your goal might be to experience less stress because it is negatively impacting on your health.

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You might not have any control over the occurrence of stressful events, but you can control how you react to stress by developing stress-management techniques (e.g. practicing mindfulness for 10 minutes a day). Another example might be if your goal is to get 8 hours of sleep every night. This might sound like a reasonable goal, but if you regularly have to stay up late after your children go to bed to get work done, this goal might not be very realistic for you, and might actually cause you more stress. In this case, changing your goal to going to bed a minute earlier every night might be more achievable.

Ensure that your goal is meaningful to you. What value does this goal hold for you? How important would it be for you to achieve it? Does it align with your core values? Our reasons or motivations for change are important predictors of our behaviours. If the reason for change is not sufficiently important to you, you may think about making the change, you might even take some steps to change, but you are less likely to commit to the change. The more closely aligned your goal is to your core values, the more likely you are to take action and stick with the change.

Learn as much as you can about the behaviour you are trying to adopt. Knowledge is important when it comes to behaviour change. Consult credible sources (e.g., your doctor, mental health professional, peer-reviewed journals, etc.) about the possible benefits or drawbacks for you. For example, we have all heard about the benefits of exercise for our mental and physical health, but this might not mean that every type of exercise will be beneficial for you. If you experience chronic pain, it might be more beneficial for you to aim for low intensity exercise like swimming and water aerobics than maybe walking or running or doing weights at the gym. The more knowledge you hold about the behaviour you would like to adopt, the more able you are to make an informed and appropriate choice for you and plan ahead. Knowing about the benefits that you can specifically gain from reaching your goal, can also help keep you motivated to adopt the desired behaviour and stick with it over time.

Monitor your behaviour. Actively monitor your goal and regulate your behaviour in response to it. Check in with yourself around what behaviours are getting you closer to your goal and which are not. Keeping a journal can help with this. Note your behaviour and accompanying thoughts and feelings. Might you be engaging in particular behaviour when feeling sad or stressed that moves you away from your goal? For example, you might binge on junk food when upset and this moves you away from your goal of losing weight or eating healthy. Notice these thought-feeling-behaviour patterns. Do not suppress your thoughts or feelings, as this will only strengthen the habit you are trying to change

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Allow yourself time. Be patient with yourself and the change process. Sometimes it can take months, or longer, to move from thinking about behaviour change to preparing for the change to finally taking action.

Celebrate success. Do not forget to celebrate your small successes. Do not wait until the very end to celebrate. Celebrate those daily achievements. Reward yourself as you progressively reach the incremental goals you have set for yourself. However, make sure that the rewards you choose are consistent with your goal and maintain your progress. For example, if you have managed to replace half of the junk food you usually eat with vegetables this month, do not reward yourself with junk food, reward yourself with a delicious healthy meal out with family or friends, or by buying that item you have been eyeing in the store.

Good Luck !