

On the Journey to New Habits, Take Tiny Steps

New Year's resolutions fail because people aim too high and get discouraged quickly. Instead, celebrate small accomplishments.

By

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The new year is an ideal time to observe how people try to change their own behavior. Upsurges of enthusiasm in early January are generally followed by flagging commitment in February. Nearly everyone wants to make some kind of life change: eat better, lose weight, exercise more regularly, sleep and relax more. But the alarming levels of obesity, sleeplessness and stress seen in the world—and in my Stanford University behavior-research lab—show a painful gap between the changes people want and what they actually do.

For the most part, we tend to blame ourselves for not being willing to work hard enough to adopt new habits. But to be effective, change doesn't have to be hard at all—and shouldn't be. Tiny adjustments that come easily and make us happy are the ones that work best. It's our approach to self-improvement that needs to change.

It turns out that there is a formula for any successful shift in behavior. This applies to everything from flossing your teeth to running a marathon. To instill a habit, the first thing you need is motivation: Pick a behavior that you want to do rather than one you merely feel obligated to do. Second, you need to be able to do it: Make the change simple and small at first. Third, you need a personal prompt: Identify a way to reliably trigger the behavior. Finally, you need to celebrate your new habit, so that your brain associates it with positive feelings.

My research team has tested this approach with more than 40,000 people over the past decade. For instance, an IT expert named Sukumar had been trying yearly since the age of 26, with no success, to lose the paunch that he was growing while sitting behind his desk. At age 43, he needed a different way to get started. So, at first, every time he brushed his teeth, he would do two push-ups, then hold a "plank" position for just five seconds. Rather than minimize these relatively incremental accomplishments, he celebrated them, which made him happier. Once his habit took root, it grew naturally. Now 51, he does 50 push-ups and a five-minute plank each day. He has lost the paunch, changed his self-image and enjoys his strenuous workouts.

When you start small, you can quickly move on to experiencing the rewards that motivate you to do more. I advise people to start with changes no bigger than Sukumar's two push-ups and progress by small steps from there. Take a busy mom named Amy, who needed to manage distractions and stay focused on essential tasks. The habit she initially designed with our help was just to write one must-do task on a Post-it Note and stick it on her car dashboard, prompted

by each day's kindergarten drop-off. She didn't even have to do the task itself at first; the initial habit was all about setting priorities. But she quickly felt successful and could move on to doing the single task and then others, and ultimately used the same principles to build a successful business.

Such experiences tell us a lot about changing behavior. First, don't think you have to create motivation. Choose habits that you already are eager to adopt. Second, go tiny. Why? Small is successful and sustainable because it is simpler. Next, design a prompt. We respond almost automatically to hundreds of behavior prompts each day that we barely notice (for instance, when you feel a few drops of rain on your arm, you open your umbrella); no behavior happens without some kind of prompt. Maybe you've been wanting to use the meditation app that you downloaded last week, but without a prompt, you forget to try. The best way to prompt a new habit is to anchor it to an existing routine in your life, whether it's flushing the toilet, turning on the coffee pot in the morning or buckling your seat belt.

As you try each new habit, celebrate immediately. Cause yourself to feel good in that exact moment, whether it's an inward "Good job!" or an outward fist pump. You deliberately reinforce the habit by tapping into the reward circuitry of your brain, causing it to recognize and encode the sequence of behaviors you just performed. The more intense the positive emotion, the faster your new behavior will become automatic. Think about all those times that you could have changed but didn't, and here you are—changing. Isn't that worth celebrating?

It isn't primarily repetition over a long period that creates habits; it's the emotion that you attach to them from the start. Data from the most recent 5,200 people to complete a five-day course of our program showed that more than half were able to instill habits in five days or less.

When people work together as a family, business or community to celebrate and create change, the effects can be even more transformative. One of my favorite projects was at a research hospital where the challenge was to tackle the problem of nurse burnout, a large and growing issue in health care. As we taught the course for four weeks via live online video, I was able to see each nurse on my screen. Some were in their pajamas at home, flopped on the couch, eating takeout food, wiped out. Others sat at desks staring into their computer cameras with faces full of fatigue.

I heard firsthand just how difficult it was for them to do basic things like drink enough water, eat regularly, and even get a full night's sleep. So we worked together on creating healthy habits like "After I open my computer, I will take a sip of water," or "After I answer the call light, I will take a deep breath."

These super-small habits started to make a big difference. The nurses began changing together. They also started celebrating each other—a quick clap for a fellow nurse who took a drink of water, a "good for you!" after someone took a deep relaxing breath. Data showed statistically meaningful improvements related to their daily stress levels. In a follow-up survey three months later, the improvements were still in place, and more than three-quarters of the nurses reported that they had created other positive changes using the same methods.

It's easy to underestimate the power of tiny change. But some of the most profound transformations start from small adjustments—from suffering to less suffering, from fear to hope, from feeling overwhelmed to being empowered. So, set aside the conventional wisdom about self-improvement: There's no need to work toward big, ambitious goals. By going tiny, you can discover for yourself the changes that will change everything.