

How to Build New Habits

Source: Lifeworks

Habit-building is a great skill to have, particularly if you're someone who wants to improve aspects of your life but aren't quite sure how. Making a new habit feel second nature is possible for anyone, and can help you achieve small and large goals by breaking them down into daily or weekly activities. Here are some ways you can create new habits:

Know what success looks like

When you're starting to build a new habit – for example, saving money – spend some time doing a positive visualization of what that will look like. For example, you might picture a certain number in your bank balance, or imagine yourself not feeling nervous when you open your credit card statement. Spend some time picturing how it will feel to have that positive habit as a regular part of your life.

Don't leave it to chance

Part of the pressure of building a habit is having to remember to do it. However, if you build reminders into your day, you'll be much better equipped. For example:

Set reminders in your calendar. Using a digital reminder app can keep you on-task.

Leave a note where you'll see it. For example, if you're trying to remember to bring your lunch to work, post a note on the back of the front door so you'll get a reminder when you need it.

Build on top of existing habits. If you need to remember to take medication in the morning, for example, use brushing your teeth as the reminder for the new habit.

Use a tool like a FitBit. If you want to remember to stretch or walk 10,000 steps, a tool like this will help remind you.

Find accountability

When we promise ourselves that we're going to exercise three times a week, it's easy to make excuses and let it slide. But it's much harder to let it go if someone else is expecting you to do it. Here are a few suggestions for creating accountability for yourself:

Find a friend who wants to build the same habit. It could be doing a daily yoga practice, for example. Each day you can check in to make sure you've each done it.

Join a support group. You may want to build a habit of healthier eating – there are online and offline groups you can join to help you along the way.

Make yourself accountable to future you. To build positive habits to get out of ruts, picture the version of yourself who has built this positive habit.

Create an incentive

Promising yourself some kind of reward for achieving your habit building goals. For example, you may want to build a habit of waking up half an hour earlier in order to spend 30 minutes on creative writing each morning before work. You might promise yourself that once you've done this every day for a month, you'll register for a creative writing course that you've been researching.

Incentives can be big or small, but they need to be something you really want in order to act as a reward.

Take on one at a time

Don't try to tackle multiple new habits at once: you'll likely end up feeling overwhelmed and defeated. Choose one and then, when it becomes an automatic part of your routine, start on the next one.

Track your progress

Like at school when you had a star chart for good behaviour, seeing your progress can give you a little endorphin rush. Here are some ways to track progress:

In an app. There are many apps out there that will help you track whatever habit you want to build.

On a chart. There are plenty of printable habit trackers. You can put it somewhere on your desk or wall or in a journal.

In your diary. If you keep a journal or even an appointment diary, you can note down each day you complete your habit.

Habits you can use as foundations

You already have many habits that you can use as triggers for new ones. Here are some examples of building new habits onto existing ones:

- Making a cup of tea → three-minute mindfulness practice while the kettle boils
- Styling your hair or doing makeup → pelvic floor exercises
- Showering → stretch while the water heats up
- Taking medication → list three things you're grateful for
- Commute to work → read or listen to a book
- Calling a family member once a week → use hands-free and go for a brisk walk
- Watching TV → squats during the credits or ad breaks
- Going to the supermarket → avoid the snack aisle

Making space for new habits

Of course, not all new habits will fit into the space of existing ones. You might need to make more room in your schedule for more time- and focus-intensive habits like working out, writing, learning a new skill, or crafting. For that, you might have to get creative or a bit disciplined. Here are some ways to fit in more time-consuming habits:

Outsource, batch, or delegate some housework. If you find yourself spending more time than others in your household on cleaning, laundry, or cooking, you may need to reclaim some of your time by delegating chores to others, completing tasks in a batch (like cooking), or paying someone to take care of some of it.

Pay for it. If you want to learn a new skill or exercise more, then paying for a class, tutor, or trainer may mean you're more likely to put it in your calendar and turn up.

Be disciplined. Avoiding time sinks like binge-watching TV shows or scrolling on social media can be difficult, but doing so is key to making time for better habits. Identify where you lose the most time in your day, and whenever you catch yourself doing one of these things, remind yourself of your goals.

Schedule it. Put your time for your new habit into your calendar.

Experts say it takes an average of 66 days to make a new habit an automatic behaviour – sometimes more. That's a lot of days, but if you find that you fall off the wagon, don't beat yourself up: missing a few days here and there doesn't mean you have to start again completely from scratch. Just focus on the outcome of replacing old habits with new ones and the improvements to your life your new habit will make.