

Making a Change

Some changes are relatively easy to make. If you want to paint your room a different color or change your hairstyle, you just make a decision and do it. Other changes are much more difficult to make. Those tend to be the ones that involve changing your behavior or habits of thought. You might recognize that a certain behavior or thought pattern is not helping you or is getting in the way of progress in your life, but changing yourself takes more than just deciding to change. You need to overcome what may be deeply ingrained habits and a natural tendency to keep things the way they are. This article offers tips on making these more difficult kinds of personal change.

Consider your readiness to change.

Researchers have found that people's success in making personal changes is tied to their readiness for change. In the early stages of a personal change, people think about it, weighing the pros and cons. They then move through stages of planning for the change, taking action in steps toward the change, sustaining the change in the face of obstacles and setbacks, and, finally, adopting the change as a well-established habit.

If you try to make a challenging personal change before you're ready for the action step, you may find that you lack both the resolve and the information you need to follow through. That might happen, for example, if you try to make a change when you're still weighing the benefits of the change, before you've set a clear goal for the change or planned how you'll make it.

Focus on one change at a time.

Another cause of failure in making personal change is taking on too much at once. Change is hard, so focus on one change at a time. Think about all the changes you'd like to make, and choose one to start with. Even if it's just a small change, it will give you a chance to practice. As you make progress, it will also give you a taste of success. Once you've mastered that change, you can move on to another, with new confidence and motivation.

Create a positive vision for the change.

Imagine what your life will be like after you successfully make the change you've chosen for yourself. What will be better? How will you feel? How might your relationships with others improve? This positive vision is the "why" of your change—the reason you want to make it—and can be an important motivator to come back to as you move forward.

Prepare yourself for the change.

Think about how you'll make the change. What will the first step be? When would be the best time to start making your change? Who can give you emotional support and encouragement as you move through the change process? Will you need to learn any new skills? How will you deal with triggers that might tempt you to revert to old behaviors? Would it help to work with an expert coach or counselor?

Having a plan for the change not only gives you a roadmap for the change process, it can also boost your confidence that you're able to make the change. Your preparation and your belief that you can do this are important factors in your ultimate success.

Commit yourself to the change.

Write down your goal for the change, and post it where you'll be reminded of it. Some health apps allow you to set a goal and track your progress, which is another way of committing to certain kinds of change. Tell a few supportive people about the change you're making, and ask for their encouragement. Making your change plan known to others can be a big motivator to follow through. Social support can help you through the rough spots of a change, and the expectations of others can add a level of accountability to your commitment.

Begin to make the change, one step at a time.

Start with just one step toward your change. It can be a small one. If you want to become more physically active, you might start with a five-minute walk. If you want to spend less time online, you might read one chapter of a book. If you want to learn a new skill, you might start with one short lesson. If you want to strengthen a relationship, change one small aspect of your behavior. Take that first step, and allow yourself to savor the feel of it. Feel pride in taking action to improve yourself. Tie those good feelings back to your positive vision for the change.

Keep at it, building the change into a new habit.

Repeat that small step on a regular schedule, and build on it. When a five-minute walk is easy for you, extend it to 20 minutes. Spend a little more time reading or learning your new skill every week. As you build on your change and make it part of your routine, keep savoring the feel of it. Notice how your muscles are growing stronger. Enjoy your sense of accomplishment in mastering your new skill. Take pride in having more control over your behavior in a relationship.

Use whatever tricks you need to make the new behavior as easy and enjoyable as possible and to remind yourself to keep at it. Leave your walking shoes by the front door where you'll see them and they're easy to put on. Schedule time for your new behavior in your smartphone's calendar with a reminder alert. Find ways to make the new action fun, something you look forward to.

If you're trying to replace an old behavior pattern with a new one, notice the triggers that make you want to revert to your old way of doing things. Think about ways to avoid situations with those triggers or, when that's not possible, come up with new actions you can take in response to them.

Over time—and this can take many weeks—notice how your regular and repeated actions become part of your daily and weekly routine, and how your new responses to what were triggers for the old behavior start to feel more natural. The goal here is for the change to become a new habit, a behavior that's automatic and enjoyable.

Harness the power of social support.

If you enlisted supportive friends at the start of your change, lean on them throughout your change process. Let them know about your progress so they can cheer you on. Let them know about setbacks too, so they can help you get back on track with a combination of encouragement and problem-solving conversation. Just keeping them posted on your progress can make you feel accountable to someone besides yourself, which can be a huge motivator to keep going.

A professional coach or counselor can play this social-support role, too, while also providing expert guidance. Health coaches, life coaches, and mental health counselors all have expertise in helping people make personal change, from setting goals and planning a change to taking the first steps and sticking with it when change is hard to sustain.

View setbacks as learning opportunities.

Setbacks (or relapses, in the language of addiction) are almost inevitable when making a personal change. The key to your ultimate success is not whether you have setbacks, but how you handle them. If you view them as marks of personal failure, you'll have a hard time bouncing back and moving forward. A more effective approach is to examine setbacks for what they can teach you. Learn from them, rather than blaming yourself for having them, and adjust your change plan.

If you miss a week of physical activity, for example, think about what caused you to slip from your plan. What was going on in your life that made your change effort hard to sustain? How might you make the activity easier to work into your routine? Might there be a better time of day to exercise or a different way to remind yourself? How might you make the activity more pleasurable, perhaps by listening to music or audio books, or by exercising with a friend? Might you try a different activity that's more enjoyable and provides similar health benefits?

Pay attention to setbacks as opportunities to learn. Use what they have to teach you about what motivates you and what doesn't, and the triggers that can send you off track. Remind yourself of your positive vision for the change. Make adjustments to your plan, as needed. Then keep at it, one step at a time.

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