



## *Habits That Stick*

Carl Greer, PhD, PsyD

How often have you vowed to make a change in some area of your life only to find that after a few attempts to establish a new habit you've gone back to the old ways? Changes at the margin can become habits, but there are secrets to making them stick.

Dream big but take small, defined actions. You might want to lose twenty or thirty pounds or more, but what small actions could you take every day to begin on the path toward that goal? Could you eliminate sweets and alcoholic drinks altogether or have only a small portion one night a week? If you want to save money for retirement or a special trip, could you save ten dollars a week to start? If you often wait for an elevator, you might stretch your calves or shoulder muscles until the elevator shows up, a small practice that will make you a little more limber and that can be amplified by doing it more often and in more situations.

Combine the new habit with an old one. It's easier to make new habits stick if you combine them with old ones. If you brush your teeth after breakfast each day, could you commit to doing something else, such as ten minutes of stretching and yoga, right after you finish brushing? If on Thursdays, you have a fun evening class, could you come home from class, log into your bank account, and transfer ten dollars from your checking to your savings?

Give yourself structure and flexibility. Some people say it takes three weeks to establish a habit, but the key might actually be to set a goal for engaging in the new behavior every day and reward yourself if you did it at least five out of the seven days. Also, try to figure out what happened on those two days that you didn't follow through. You might gain some valuable insights into how to take action on days when your schedule gets changed. If you didn't do a relaxing breathing exercise or meditation at lunchtime as planned because a call came in, you could figure out a backup time when you could make up for your missed session.

Hold yourself accountable. Whether it's a carrot on a stick to motivate you, have an accountability plan. If you would be uncomfortable telling a friend that once again, you didn't follow through on doing what you said you would, ask them to check in with you at the end of the week to ask how you did. Have a plan for a small reward when you meet a small goal. Keep track of your actions, marking your calendar or a chart whenever you engage in your new habit so that you're not fooling yourself about how often you follow through on meeting your goal.

Build on your habits with new goals. Once you find yourself doing those ten minutes of stretching or yoga

or transferring a few dollars to your savings account every week, set a new goal. Increase the minutes or dollar figure or come up with a complementary goal. You might commit to taking a yoga class or being more mindful of when the grocery store runs sales on your favorite items to take advantage of the savings, socking the extra savings away in your bank account.

Develop your creativity. When you open yourself up to being more creative, you'll find more ways to achieve your goals and move past any obstacles you face in your striving for better habits. Try writing with your non-dominant hand. Take a new route to work or a friend's house. Dance and see what choreography you naturally create as you move in time to the music. Take time out to write a list of small, achievable goals you would like to establish on your way to a larger transformation and come up with a plan for making the changes happen.

Consult your wise inner self for guidance. Within each of us is a wise inner self that can be more honest with us than we are when we're in ordinary consciousness and restricted by unconscious biases. Set aside time to sit quietly, focused on the natural rhythm of your breathing or a word such as "peace." When you feel your busy mind is less active and your muscles are relaxed, pose this question to your wise inner self: "What do I need to know that can help me right now?" The answer might come in words or as an inner knowing or a symbol, sound, or visual image whose meaning you'll need to interpret. You might want to thank your wise, inner self for helping you and see what it has to say in return. Many people don't trust themselves. Consulting one's wise inner self can help you develop greater faith in your ability to solve your own problems and find helpful resources.

Gain energy or momentum for change. When you consult your wise inner self about the changes you want to make, use the shamanic idea of *ayni* or reciprocity: release something and bring something else in to take its place. Ask your wise inner self, "What do I need to let go of?" and "What do I need to bring in?" (A variation on this is to ask, "What can I give you?" and "What can you give me?"). You might actually feel an energetic shift as you present to your wise inner self some belief or energy that has been keeping you from reaching your goals: the notion that you can't trust yourself to follow through on your commitments, perhaps, or the idea that you'll never get past all the obstacles in your way. You might also feel a shift as you receive what your wise inner self gives you: a symbol representing your strength, for example, or the saying, "Get right back on that horse," or something else. You might want



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to experiment with reaching your arms out in a gesture of releasing something to your wise inner self who is in front of you or drawing in your arms to accept and pull into yourself whatever your wise inner self is giving you. I have found that these movements can be helpful for feeling an energetic shift that gives me momentum to follow through on making changes, adopting habits that stick.

If you've failed in the past to achieve your goals, don't give up. Try again, taking time out to reflect on what obstacles you've faced and how you might overcome them, drawing on your wise inner self for more insights and using these strategies for establishing new habits.

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