Consciously Choose Your Unconscious Habits

Have you ever tried to make a healthy change? Perhaps you started a walking routine, or added more vegetables to your meals. For many of us, we can make these changes for a while, but in the end they just don’t stick. If that’s you, here’s some good news: healthy habits can be intentionally created if you follow certain steps and know a few tricks.

Making a behavior change takes deliberate effort until it becomes a habit. It’s difficult at first because you have to consciously choose to do it. Fortunately, when a new action is linked to a current habit, and performed repeatedly, that new action eventually changes from effort to habit.

In her book *Succeed*, Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson compares the amount of memory in conscious mind to that of a sticky note. Conversely, the unconscious mind has enormous memory like a NASA supercomputer. With that comparison, it’s easy to imagine how the conscious mind (the sticky note) can run out of space and allow important efforts to drop and be completely forgotten! This is the importance of habits; they are stored in the unconscious mind and take little thought or effort.

Repetition and Linking

To make a habit, a behavior has to be repeated consistently. It’s also important to link the new action to a current habit that you can use as a trigger. For example, most people are triggered to fasten the seatbelt the moment they sit down in a vehicle. Let’s take the example of creating a habit of walking 15 minutes each day. First, find a time of day that works, then link the walk to another habit. Perhaps the plan will be to walk 15 minutes after breakfast or coffee each morning.

Next, you have to do the work. There’s no way to sugar coat it; until the action becomes a habit, it will take effort. Each time the action is taken, though, it becomes easier. In the beginning, reminders are

Continued inside.

Habits Worth Creating

Not sure where to start? Here are a few suggestions. Consider habits that will have a positive impact on many areas of your life, such as adequate sleep and regular physical activity.

- Stand up and march in place, do pushups, sit-ups or some other form of exercise during every TV commercial break.
- Get 10 to 15 minutes of exercise rather than caffeine and sugar at break time.
- Get ready for bed earlier in the evening, so you can relax later. Also turn off all electronic screens, and dim the lights at least one hour before bed time.
- Meditate or relax for 20 minutes each day, first thing in the morning or last thing at night.
- Drink an eight-ounce glass of water before each meal and snack.
- Eat fruit for dessert.
- Try eating at least two vegetables with dinner.
- Brush and floss your teeth each night before bed.
helpful. Then just do it, day in and day out, and it will become second nature to the point that it feels odd if the habit is missed.

**What to Expect**

How much time and effort it will take to create a habit is unique to everyone. The idea that it takes 21 days to create a habit is a myth that has been dispelled by recent research. Newer studies have found that on average it takes 10 weeks to develop a new habit. The length of time to create a habit seems to be related to difficulty. One study found that some actions may become second nature in as few as 18 days, while others could take nearly a year. Knowing this removes the pressure of creating a habit in 21 days. For the all-or-nothing thinkers, missing one opportunity to perform the new action doesn’t mean you have to start over at day one of habit formation. Pick up your new action at the next opportunity and you will continue to move toward creating your habit.

**The Process**

1) Choose a health goal important to you (such as losing weight or taking your medications regularly).
2) Pick a simple action. Choose something that will move you toward this goal, something you can do daily.
3) Plan. Think about when and where you will take this action. What established habit (trigger) can you link it to? This process can take some time, but don’t skip it—it’s worth the effort.
4) Take action. Every time you encounter your trigger, do the chosen action. This is going to take awareness, you may need to create reminders initially.
5) Keep going. The action will become easier the more you consistently repeat it. At some point (perhaps around 10 weeks) you will find the action has become second nature.
6) Celebrate! You’ve made a new healthy habit. Congratulate yourself, and choose the next one!

Some people find that tracking is helpful when creating new habits. Below is a guide you can use each day to track your progress, check the box on the days you complete the action as planned, and rate how automatic that action is feeling. The important thing is to persist. With planning and effort, a new healthier lifestyle can be created—one habit at a time!

**Reference:**

British Journal of General Practice, December 2012 Making health habitual: the psychology of “habit-formation” and general practice.

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**Healthy Habit Tracker**

Check the box on the days you complete the action as planned. On the bottom row, rate how automatic the action is feeling (1 = not at all; 10 = completely).

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High blood pressure can silently make your heart work harder, increasing risk for a stroke, heart attack, and kidney or eye problems. To help lower your blood pressure, or keep your healthy blood pressure where it is, try creating any of these habits.

1. Take your medication as directed by your doctor at the same time every day. This can ensure you are getting the most out of your medications. To get started you might need a trigger or reminder such as placing your medication by your alarm clock or coffee maker.

2. Monitor your blood pressure at home if recommended. Take your blood pressure before getting out of bed or while you read the morning paper.

3. Stress less. Take time every day to do something you enjoy. Give yourself some free time, relax, and enjoy your activity. Common activities include walking, meditation, reading or listening to an audio book, or even enjoying your backyard.

4. Eat more fruits and vegetables every day. Stock your refrigerator with pre-cut veggies or fruits. This way, when you’re looking for a snack, you can easily grab a healthy one.

5. Partner with your healthcare provider. Regular visits and open communication about your symptoms and health leads to better care. Keep a small notebook listing your health questions and concerns, and take this with you to your medical appointments. Ask for written instructions from your doctor.
**Picnic Burritos**

Makes four burritos; serving size: one burrito

**Ingredients**

- 2 cups cooked, cubed chicken breast (any kind, even leftovers)
- 1 cup shredded purple cabbage
- 1 cup shredded carrots
- 1 large avocado, sliced
- 8 large lettuce leaves, romaine or green leaf
- 4 Tbsp. favorite Asian sesame dressing
- 4 whole wheat tortillas (burrito sized)

**Directions**

Place 2 lettuce leaves on your wrap. Place ½ cup chicken, ¼ cup cabbage, ¼ cup carrots, ¼ avocado, and 1 Tbsp. of salad dressing on top of the lettuce. By stacking the ingredients this way, you can make your burritos in the morning and enjoy them later on your picnic.

**Tip:** try wrapping your burrito in parchment or waxed paper. Roll it up and tuck in the ends. This will prevent the contents from falling out of the burrito while eating. Enjoy!

Per burrito: calories 310; total fat 14 g; saturated fat 2 g; cholesterol 55 mg; sodium 540 mg; total carb 21 g; fiber 6 g; protein 24 g.