THREE STEPS TO CHANGING A HABIT

There are many possible approaches to changing a habit. The three-step strategy that follows has the advantage of being simple—and powerful. You can use these steps to take any intention out of the realm of New Year’s resolutions and make it a reality.

Commit

If you want to adopt a new habit, then make a deep, soulful, and authentic commitment to change. The following steps depend on this one, so check out your level of commitment up front.

One key to commitment is your use of language. See if you can move from obligation (“I probably should become smoke-free”) or passion (“I want to become smoke-free”) up to the level of a promise (“I will become smoke-free”).

Also, state the habit positively. Focus on what you want rather than what you don’t want. For example, saying that you intend to become smoke-free is more positive than saying that you want to quit smoking.

Another key is going public with your commitment. Tell all the key people in your life about the change you want to make. Put that change in writing. Make a formal contract with yourself and post it where your family can see it. Pledge to keep this promise with the same level of commitment you’d use in promising to tell the truth in court.

Monitor

Next, find a way to measure how well you’re keeping your commitment. Set up a feedback system to keep track of how consistently you’re succeeding in changing your habit.

For example, you could create a chart with spaces for each day of the week; just note how many times during the week you practice your new habit. You could make a similar notation in your calendar.

You can create other visual ways to display the occurrence of a behavior over time. One common format is to draw a graph that represents time on the X-axis and events or actions on the Y-axis. Say that you want to acquire a new
habit of saving 5 percent of your take-home pay each month. Using a graph, you could visually display your progress in acquiring this habit.

We can find other ways to set up a feedback system for hard-to-monitor goals. For example, a consultant who does most of her work over the phone could tape-record her business conversations (with her clients’ permission). Then she can review the tape to monitor her speaking habits. Teachers and trainers can videotape their presentations.

Remember that simple lists can work wonders. If you want to drop the habit of complaining, just list the number of complaints you utter each day in your journal. If you want to become more skilled at making promises, then log each promise in your daily journal. Once each day or week, review the list to see how well you’re keeping these promises. Along with this, you can give yourself a daily “grade” on your overall progress in changing the habit.

We can also ask key people in our lives to observe us closely and share their observations, verbally or in writing. I had a habit of slouching forward as I walked. When I committed to change that habit, I asked friends and coworkers to give me daily feedback on my walking posture. I don’t have the habit of slouching any more.

You could give your feedback system more teeth by building in rewards and penalties. When you practice the habit of exercising three times during the week, you could schedule a massage on Sunday. Or you could promise to pay your daughter $1 whenever she catches you driving without your seat belt fastened.

**Practice**

As usual, I forgot to exercise today.

I lost my temper with the kids again, even after I promised I wouldn’t. No wonder they don’t trust me.

I had a third cup of coffee today; yesterday I promised I’d only drink one. I can never trust myself when it comes to changing a habit.

Kicking ourselves with comments like these when we fail to keep our commitments consumes a lot of time and energy. That’s energy we could channel into adopting a new habit instead. When our behavior falls short of our intentions, we can simply note the fact without reproach. Then we can get back to practicing the new habit.
Reproach kills many a New Year’s resolution. For example, people make a resolution to exercise daily. On January 1, 2, and 3, they do. Then on January 4, they forget to exercise, slap their foreheads and say, I missed a day. I’m such a failure. Instead of reproaching themselves, they could simply recommit to the habit and just keep practicing.

When we notice ourselves falling into self-reproach, we might slip into reproaching our reproach: Not only did I skip exercising today—I got really angry about it. I’m so disappointed in myself for having that reaction. Comments like these just add another layer to the problem and impede our efforts to change. Self-reproach at any level is simply another habit that we can choose to release.

So the third step is to practice, practice, practice—without reproach. And remember that success in changing any habit has a lot to do with persistence. Some habits will change in a few hours, while others might take weeks or months. Be willing to hang in there and monitor your progress over time.

**Begin now**

Some people might not be content with these three steps to change a habit. They might argue that they need to hear a motivational speaker, get some counseling, or read another self-help book before they start exercising daily, or skipping that extra cup of coffee, or balancing their checkbook regularly.

Maybe not. Perhaps there’s nothing you need to do first before you start exercising daily, balancing your checkbook regularly, or adopting any other new habit. Perhaps it’s just a matter of three simple steps that you can begin now.

Many people will buy this idea when they want to change a relatively minor behavior, such as balancing a checkbook. They might not buy it when seeking to make a major change, such as releasing sadness or maximizing happiness.

Play with the three steps I recommend and see what works. You might find that commitment, feedback, and practice are enough to start living the life of your dreams.
cross off your excuses

Describe any new habit that you’d like to adopt. Then list every explanation you can think of for not practicing this behavior. Begin writing in the space below and use additional paper if needed. Be sure to include all of your favorite excuses.

The habit I’d like to adopt is ...

My excuses for not adopting this habit include ...

When you’re done, scrutinize your list of excuses for one minute. Then literally and boldly cross out each excuse. Cross off “being tired” as an excuse. Cross off “not wanting to” as an excuse. Do the same for “I didn’t feel like it,” “I guess I’m too old to change,” or any other excuse.

If you’re unwilling to give up an excuse, that’s OK. You can keep the excuse. That means releasing any ideas about changing the habit for now.

Follow up with more writing. Describe what you learned about yourself by laying your excuses out in the open. Ask yourself if you’re truly willing to give up each excuse. Describe in detail the benefits of doing so. Then declare the specific habit you intend to adopt.

By listing and crossing off my excuses, I discovered that I ...

2 0 8 F a l l i n g • A w a k e
By giving up my excuses, I discovered that I could gain benefits such as ...

I intend to ...

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**change the habit**

In the space below, list something about yourself that you’d like to change, even if you’re sure it’s not just a habit. Then write a detailed plan describing how you will adopt a new habit as a means toward achieving your desired change.

I discovered that I’d like to change ...

The specific habit I’d like to adopt is ...

To adopt this habit, I intend to ...
**Practice the habit of happiness**

Experiment with applying the three recommended steps for habit changing as ways to immediately experience more happiness.

In the space below, describe a habit you intend to adopt as a way to routinely experience more happiness. For example, declare your intention to exercise regularly, attend a weekly support group, meditate daily, or begin releasing your resentments.

I intend to ...

Now create a feedback system. You can experiment with many options. One possibility is to carry a 3x5 card with you; use this card to record how many times per day you practice the habit. You could make similar notations in your calendar or journal.

Or you might choose to give yourself a daily "score" that summarizes your mood—anything from -10 for extreme sadness to +10 for ecstasy. The simple act of monitoring your moods might be enough to raise your level of happiness.

Describe your feedback system in the space below.

I intend to monitor my behavior or attitudes by ...

Finally, review your experience. After one month of practicing your new habit, come back to this journal entry. Describe how habit changing worked as a path toward greater happiness.

If you noticed any examples of self-reproach, also summarize them here. Putting self-critical statements on paper might help you release them.

I discovered that I ...