



Sticking With It

Establishing healthy, lasting habits isn't a feat of willpower; it's a matter of fitting them seamlessly into your life. And science shows that with a few smart strategies, you can retrain your brain to enjoy those good-for-you activities. Follow these tips to make any resolution simply routine.

TEXT BY RONDA KAYSEN

MAKING POSITIVE CHANGES in your life is more than a numbers game. We can't just muscle our way through a new activity for 21 days—a time frame that's been bandied about since the 1960s—and expect it to be ingrained. On the contrary: “This notion that there's a magic number of days to form a habit is garbage,” says Katy Milkman, PhD, a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and author of *How to Change* (Portfolio, 2021). Research has found huge variations in how long it takes for new behaviors to become consistent—anywhere from a few weeks to many months. And the more complex the practice, the longer it takes. The real secret is carving out space in your life for an activity or objective, making it as appealing and easy to do as possible, and giving yourself permission to revise your plans along the way. Let's break it down.

① THINK STRATEGICALLY

Lofty aspirations are great, but to actually change, you need teensy ones. “The number-one mistake people have made for generations is trying to motivate themselves toward something abstract,” says B. J. Fogg, PhD, director of the Behavior Design Lab at Stanford University and author of *Tiny Habits* (Mariner Books, 2020). Instead of a vague-but-ambitious goal—*Stress less! Get in shape!*—list activities that help you meet that big goal, then whittle them down to ones that realistically fit your life. You might dream of taking a 90-minute yoga class every day, for example, but work gets in the way. Find an app with 20-minute videos (Glo has thousands in different durations), and hit the studio on weekends.

② SET THE BAR LOW

This one's a bit of a Jedi mind trick. When you identify the activity that will help you achieve a larger goal—like reading before bed to help you decompress and sleep better—make a baby-step commitment. Vow to read a page a night. If you do, cue the confetti—you've succeeded. And if you finish a chapter, you've eclipsed your expectations. "You're being realistic about how motivation really works," says Fogg. "Once you take that first step, the next doesn't feel so hard."

③ SWEETEN THE DEAL

To make daunting tasks doable, employ an incentive plan. If you aim to order less takeout and cook more, save your favorite true-crime podcast for prep time. Milkman calls this the Mary Poppins effect: "A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down for adults, not just kids," she says. (And in the case of grown-ups, a squeeze of lemon might make the amount of water you want to drink every day vanish, too.) We're often wired to crave immediate gratification, so go ahead and turn that challenging daily or weekly task into—dare we say it?—me time.

④ BE THE CHANGE

That friend who meditates each morning, and has the serene glow to prove it? She's likely running on autopilot, not rigid self-discipline. Researchers have found that our deeply rooted habits are primarily controlled by a part of our brain called the basal ganglia, where we develop emotions, memories, and pattern recognition, so they're largely automatic. "Once it's part of your identity, you'll just do it," says Boston life coach Tiffany Julie. To get there, shift your thinking: You don't swim laps; you're a *swimmer*. You don't do yard work on weekends; you're a *gardener*.

⑤ FEED A PASSION

"Things you don't want to do almost never become habits," says Fogg, so focus on the pleasure in a new endeavor,

not the grind of it. Maybe Pilates puts you to sleep, but barre class awakens your inner Martha Graham *and* strengthens your core to save your achy back. Yes, eliminating red meat can help lower your cholesterol, but reframe it into a positive: You can turn every meal into a Mediterranean vacation (pass the roasted salmon and tzatziki, please).

⑥ BUILD IT IN

Harness the power of planning: Jot reminders in your calendar and set digital alerts. Or design new daily patterns. Put those vitamins in a pretty dish on your counter each morning to ensure you take them. Increase your steps by scheduling a walk with a friend, or up your mileage by listening to a language app (two birds!). And allow for curveballs; if you oversleep one morning, tomorrow's another day. "The past does not predict the future," says clinical psychologist Yasmine Saad, PhD, founder of Madison Park Psychological Services, in Manhattan. You can always reset.

⑦ TRADE UP

Still not sticking? Don't stress; reassess. "Life shifts, and so should our habits," says Fogg. Maybe you realize that five-step skin-care routine is ruining your nightly wind-down. This is when big-picture goals serve a purpose. Remember *why* you're doing something (be it self-care or better skin), and find a new means to that end—say, a weekly mask. Then slot it in, just like before. Your nimble mind, following the cues you've given it, will handle the rest.