

# Making healthy habits stick

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*by Pamela Wilson*

**Kicking off the new year on the right foot when you're motivated is easy. But how do you maintain new healthy habits when your resolve starts to fade?**

There are two things many of us have at the start of a new year: great ideas for healthy change and plenty of motivation.

The problem with motivation is that it disappears quite quickly. So whether you're trying to quit smoking or start meditating daily, how can you make your resolutions last beyond the second week of January?

"If we really want to change we need to figure out a way to keep doing the things that are required even when we don't feel like it or we're not excited about it," says personal development speaker Craig Harper.

And the solution lies in... teeth cleaning. Think about it, says Harper, very few of us would ever break this habit.



Cleaning our teeth every morning is a non-negotiable behaviour that most of us do without even thinking, and it's this mindset we need when trying to foster any new habit.

## **Time to act**

As Harper points out, despite being a nation that is well educated and well resourced in the areas of exercise and nutrition we are still one of the fattest, with 61% of us considered overweight.

"So, clearly, knowledge doesn't necessarily equal transformation. Change is in the application," he says.

The first step in applying ourselves is to accept that with change comes discomfort.

For example, trying to lose weight requires hard work and becomes uncomfortable for many of us when we have to get out of bed early to go for a walk or say no to that slice of chocolate cake.

By accepting from the outset that we are going to stumble upon these hurdles we can better prepare ourselves by setting individual, non-negotiable rules and just sticking to them.

## **Work around the obstacles**

On the other hand, we shouldn't invest energy and time fighting those things we can't change. Instead, we need to find ways to work with them.

This means asking yourself better questions, explains Harper. If, for example, you are middle-aged and have back problems that make exercise difficult, don't just become a couch potato.

Instead, ask yourself, 'With my genetics and at my age, what is the best way for me to get fit and improve my energy levels?'

Just as we can't change our genetics, we can't always change our personality or the biological drives that may affect how easily or quickly we change our habits, says Dr Sarah Edelman, a clinical psychologist practising in Sydney.

"There are biological drives that cause some people to be prone to alcohol de- pendency and addiction that other people don't have... so

for those people it just means they will have to work harder than someone who just enjoys a drink, for example," says Edelman.

### **The science behind changing behaviours**

No one magic formula works for changing every habit – depending on what you are trying to achieve, different approaches and expectations will be required.

For example, flossing your teeth daily is going to be easier and take less time than stopping a lifetime pattern of angry outbursts.

The claim that it takes 30 days to change a habit oversimplifies the issue, says Edelman.

Research published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* found that it can take 18 to 254 days for behaviours to become automatic when performed repetitively.

The good news is that missing the occasional day didn't affect the process, the researchers found.

Another study shows that although changing a behaviour can take a lot of effort to begin with, it does become more automatic and therefore easier over time.

And once we form a habit, even if we stop it, it will be easier to reintroduce next time round because patterns in the brain that were formed when we established the habit quickly re-emerge, according to US researchers who examined behaviour in rats.

On the flip side, this is also true for bad habits.

So if you want to make your resolutions stick, here are some golden rules to developing healthy habits:

Don't try to change too much at once. Focus on just one or two new habits at a time.

Be clear about your goals. If your goal is to be successful, define what success actually means to you.

Turn motivation into commitment by being better informed. Having a strong rationale for doing something is better than having a general recommendation or just telling yourself, 'I really must do that'.

Focus on why you are trying to change.  
Know the benefits of changing, and the consequences or costs of not.

Make time for your new habits. Get up an hour earlier if you intend to fit exercise into your schedule, or give yourself time to walk to the train station instead of driving.

Finish what you start. Don't be the person who perpetually starts but never finishes. Set yourself some non-negotiable rules around the new habit or behaviour.

Create an accountability system. Keep a diary, get a training buddy or accountability partner such as a friend, psychologist, dietician or anyone who will help you stay focused.

Get regular reinforcement through reminder systems, visual cues such as photographs and by talking to others about your goals.

Ask better questions of yourself to get better results, i.e. 'With my genetics, what's the best diet for me?'

Monitor your progress. This can be through your diary, regular records of your activities, etc.