

# NIH News in Health

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## Creating Healthy Habits Make Better Choices Easier

We know that making healthy choices can help us feel better and live longer. Maybe you've already tried to eat better, get more exercise or sleep, quit smoking, or reduce stress. It's not easy. But research shows how you can boost your ability to create and sustain a healthy lifestyle.

"It's frustrating to experience setbacks when you're trying to make healthy changes and reach a goal," says NIH behavior change expert Dr. Susan Czajkowski. "The good news is that decades of research show that change is possible, and there are proven strategies you can use to set yourself up for success."

Lots of things you do impact your health and quality of life, now and in the future. You can reduce your risk for the most common, costly, and preventable health problems—such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, type 2 diabetes, and obesity—by making healthy choices.

**Know Your Habits** • Regular things you do—from brushing your teeth to having a few drinks every night—can become habits. Repetitive behaviors that make you feel good can affect your brain in ways that create habits that may be hard to change. Habits often become automatic—they happen without much thought.

"The first step to changing your behavior is to create an awareness around what you do regularly,"



explains Dr. Lisa Marsch, an expert in behavior change at Dartmouth College. "Look for patterns in your behavior and what triggers the unhealthy habits you want to change."

Maybe you eat too much while watching TV or join a friend on smoke breaks even when you don't want a cigarette. "You can develop ways to disrupt those patterns and create new ones," Marsch says. For instance, eat meals with the TV off or join friends for healthy activities, like walk breaks.

**Make a Plan** • Make a plan that includes small, reasonable goals and specific actions you'll take to move toward them.

"If you walk by the vending machine at work and buy junk food

every afternoon, try walking a different way to eliminate that decision and bring healthy snacks from home," Czajkowski says. "Whenever possible, make the healthy choice the easy choice."

Consider what you think you'll need to be successful. How can you change things around you to support your goals? You might need to stock up on healthy foods, remove temptations, or find a special spot to relax.

Get friends and loved ones involved. Research shows that people's health behaviors tend to mirror those of their family and friends. Invite them to join you, support you, and help

you stay on track.

It's also important to plan for obstacles. Think about what might derail your best efforts to live healthier. How can you still make healthy choices during unexpected situations, in stressful times, or when tempted by old habits?

**Stay on Track** • Doing positive things for yourself can feel exciting and rewarding. But there will also be times when you wonder if you can stick with it.

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“Identify negative thoughts and turn them into realistic, productive ones,” Marsch advises.

Keeping a record can help. You can use a paper journal, computer program, or mobile app to note things like your diet, exercise, stress levels, or sleep patterns. A study of people who lost at least 30 pounds and kept the weight off for at least a year found that they often tracked their progress closely.

“Even when you think you’re about to ‘fall off the wagon,’ hold on,” Czajkowski says. “Continue to track your behavior. Sometimes when you feel like you’re failing, you can learn the most.”

Marsch and others are working on digital technologies, like mobile apps, that could support you in a moment of weakness. Her team is also using technology to learn more about how to measure and increase the ability to monitor and control our behavior.

“The more you practice self-control, the better you become at it,” says Dr. Leonard Epstein, who studies behavior change and decision-making at the University at

Buffalo. “You develop the capacity to act and react another way.”

**Think About the Future** • Epstein has found that some people have a harder time than others resisting their impulses. He calls this “delay discounting,” where you discount, or undervalue, the larger benefits of waiting in favor of smaller immediate rewards. This can lead to things like overeating, substance abuse, drinking or shopping too much, or risky sexual behavior.

“You can learn to postpone immediate gratification through episodic future thinking, or vividly imagining future positive experiences or rewards,” he explains. “It’s a great way to strengthen your ability to make decisions that are better for you in the long run.”

Epstein is now studying how to use this technique to help people who are at risk for type 2 diabetes prevent the disease.

Focusing on how a change might heal your body and enhance your life can help. When you stop smoking, your risk of a heart attack drops within 24 hours. Reducing stress can lead to better relationships. Even small improvements in your nutrition and physical activity can reduce your health risks and lengthen your life.

**Be Patient** • Sometimes when you’re trying to adopt healthier habits, other health issues can get in the way.

“When you’re really struggling with these behaviors, ask yourself if more is going on,” Czajkowski says. “For example, mental health conditions like depression and anxiety can be tied to unhealthy behaviors.”

A health professional can work



## Wise Choices Build Healthy Habits

- **Plan.** Identify unhealthy patterns and triggers. Set realistic goals. Write down steps to help you achieve them.
- **Change your surroundings.** Find ways to make healthier choices easy choices. Remove temptations. Work for changes in your community, like safe places to walk.
- **Ask for support.** Find friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, or groups for support or ask people to join you.
- **Fill your time with healthy activities.** Try exercise, a favorite hobby, or spending time with family and friends.
- **Track your progress.** Record how things are going to help you stay focused and catch slip-ups.
- **Imagine the future.** Think about future benefits to stay on track.
- **Reward yourself.** Give yourself a healthy reward when you’ve achieved a small goal or milestone, like a massage or personal time.
- **Be patient.** Improvement takes time, and setbacks happen. Focus on progress, not perfection.

with you to address any underlying issues to make change feel easier and to help you be more successful.

You’re never too out of shape, too overweight, or too old to make healthy changes. Try different strategies until you find what works best for you.

“Things may not go as planned, and that’s okay,” Czajkowski says. “Change is a process. What’s most important is to keep moving forward.” ■

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