

WELLNESS TIPS

CREATING HEALTHY HABITS

Habits are routines and behaviors that occur without much thought or planning (occurring 43% of the time by some estimates), so routine that they tend to by-pass motivation and willpower.

When you are considering stopping an unwanted habit or creating a new habit, begin by thinking about your goals - what you want and value and what the future will be like if you make such a change. It is difficult to make changes when it is something we are doing because we “should” or are told to do so.

Habits have three components:

Trigger/cue: This is something that reminds you to perform the habit. Your morning alarm is a cue to begin your morning routine (which is a series of habits).

Action: Behaviors comprising the habit(s), such as your morning routine.

Reward: Which can be physical, emotional, psychological, social.

To change an unwanted habit, pay attention to your routine and then decide on a plan to disrupt the routine and add new behaviors. To effectively develop a new habit, focus on triggers and rewards. For example, a student wanted more free time in the evening, but often had to study. In reviewing the student’s time management, although they studied after arriving home in the afternoon, they recognized a pattern of spending considerable time on social media (habit in response to the trigger of seeing the phone and hearing notifications), which wasted time and disrupted concentration, resulting in having to study later. The student decided to use arriving home as a trigger to turn off the phone and put it in another room (new habit). This resulted in more efficient and effective studying and having more time in the evenings for other desired activities (the reward).

STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A NEW HEALTHY HABIT

- Be specific. A plan of eating a healthy breakfast is too vague. Plan specific menus or foods and have them available. Set a specific time to exercise and add it to your calendar, not “when I have time.”
- Keep things simple. Is your plan complicated? Going home, changing clothes, then driving across town to the gym takes more effort than having what’s needed on

campus so that you can run over to the Field House. Sign up for Zoom Yoga sessions mentioned in the Learning Communities Newsletter that you can do at home.

- Limit decisions that need to be made. This increases the likelihood of following through. Avoid putting off the decision with “if I feel like it” or “If I’m not too tired.” These create decision points throughout the day.
- Plan ahead. Have study supplies set out for the next morning. Take a different route through MERF if you tend to stop to buy a large muffin. Have healthy food available so you can bring a healthy snack. Pack exercise clothes the night before or set them out to wear the next day.
- Be realistic. Start small, with an easy plan. How much time do you really have to devote to the new habit? Is it something you are ready to take on? Are you really willing to eat 2 vegetables for lunch and dinner or is one a day more doable to start? Would your follow-through increase if you signed up for classes at the Field House?
- Turn off the judgmental part of your brain that expects it to be done “well,” in entirety or else it isn’t “good enough.”
- What are you already doing that you can use to launch the new habit? Going to campus? Walk or ride your bike instead of taking the bus. Get off the bus 2 blocks early to get additional exercise walking
- When are your energy level or emotional state best suited for this activity? If you aren’t an early riser, exercising at 6AM might not work for you.
- Who can support you in making a habit change? Share your plan with someone or ask them to join you.
- Do it every day. Research indicates this is most effective in establishing a new habit.
- Track your actions. A log or journal gives feedback and reinforces progress.
- Identify a meaningful reward for your progress. Watch a favorite program, listen to a podcast, or talk with a with a friend while exercising. Buying something special after meeting some goal.

BE PATIENT. It can take time for something to become a habit; one study found 18 – 254 days, with a median of 66 days. It depends on the habit. If you have times of not following through

with a commitment to a new habit, don't fall into the judgment trap, just resume. Or re-evaluate if it is a reasonable goal.

It's important to begin with a plan that is sustainable. BJ Fogg ([Tiny Habits](#)) and Stephen Guise ([Mini Habits](#)) advocate developing new habits by beginning with very small action changes, especially if the overall goal seems too overwhelming or difficult. For example, begin an exercise program by doing one push-up or walking for 2 minutes daily or diet change by eating one vegetable a day. This approach calls for suspending judgment and not discounting the plan because it is small and easy. By consistently making small changes, you are setting yourself up for success, developing a routine, and can progress when you are ready.

[Mini Habits](#). Stephen Guise. Selective Entertainment, LLC., 2013.

[Tiny Habits](#). B. J. Fogg. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019.

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[7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). Stephen R. Covey. Free Press, 1989/2004.

If you would like to talk with an MSCC counselor about wellness or other questions or concerns, feel free to schedule an appointment.

Stay well and stay healthy!

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If you would like to review previous Wellness Tips, check the CCOM Medical Student Counseling Center Website: <https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>