

WELLNESS TIPS

CREATING NEW HABITS – BEGIN SMALL

Previous Wellness Tips discussed three components of habits – cue, action, and reward – and identified strategies for developing healthy habits, such as by stacking a desired new habit onto an existing one. Today's Wellness Tips focus on successfully developing new desirable habits by making small changes, which have been labelled mini habits (Guise), atomic habits (Clear), or tiny habits (Fogg).

Making a small change can be preferable to making lofty plans for a big change that is difficult to sustain and leads to feelings of discouragement or failure if one does not follow through. Beginning a habit that requires a small adjustment is easier to do and as a result, can be more effective in creating desired changes. While it is easy to think “this isn't adequate, it's ridiculous, it isn't doing anything”, in fact small changes add up over time. If you would like to develop a habit of saving money, a small automatic bank withdrawal into a separate account is less disruptive to the budget and easier to manage than transferring a large amount once a year, eventually becoming a large sum.

When identifying what positive habit you would like to develop, choose a behavior you can realistically do every day. The key is a SMALL behavior, which might be drinking 1 additional glass of water a day, doing 1 push-up, eating one baby carrot or leisure reading for 5 minutes. Making such a small behavior change is less overwhelming, easier to maintain, and contributes to developing a routine and consistency.

It is important to avoid becoming judgmental or involved in negative, self-critical thoughts. Telling yourself “this is stupid” is counterproductive.

You have been successful when you complete the desired action - you have met your goal. Once you get started with the action, you may decide to do more, such as 5 push-ups rather than one. And if you really like carrots, you might end up eating three instead of one. But it is not required to do more than the identified goal and does not commit you to doing more the next time.

Focus on the strategy and the process rather than a hard outcome. If you are not successful in establishing a habit, it's not because you have failed, but that you haven't chosen a goal that is meaningful to you or an effective process/strategy. Even the strategy of eating one baby carrot a day is flawed if you hate carrots.

An effective process minimizes resistance to creating a new habit. When you focus on developing a small habit, it is more easily incorporated into your routine and takes little effort. At least initially, minimize decisions and avoid giving yourself options to choose from. Decisions and options increase resistance by taking more mental energy. Keep things simple. Resistance is decreased if you like carrots and aren't choosing from other vegetables. In addition, carrots do not require elaborate preparation or extended cooking time and can be readily available in the refrigerator or your backpack.

Focusing on small habit changes fosters a sense of success because it is more difficult to fail. Repeated small successes contribute to a sense of self-efficacy. With repetition, as these changes are consistently

incorporated into your routine, the habit tends to grow over time. Walking for 5 minutes may gradually expand to walking 20 minutes, creating a new habit.

Habits do not have an endpoint. And that is the point - creating something that will be on-going and become a part of your preferred identity. The goal is to make these changes so small that it is almost easier to do them than to argue with yourself and not do them.

Give it a try!

Clear, J. [Atomic Habits](#). Penguin Random House. 2018.

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

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

Check the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips, including “Developing Healthy Habits”.
<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Stay Well and Stay Healthy

Feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment for questions and concerns.

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