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Managing Yourself

What Does It Really Take to Build a New Habit?

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Summary. Habit and routines are not interchangeable. A habit is a behavior done with little or no thought, whereas a routine is a series of behaviors frequently, and intentionally, repeated. To turn a behavior into a habit, it first needs to become a routine. How do you start? First... [more](#)

Our habits govern our lives, literally. Research shows that around half of our daily actions are driven by repetition. This is probably why behavioral scientists and psychologists have spent so much time writing about how to establish and keep positive habits. Regular sleep and exercise, a healthy diet, an organized schedule, and mindfulness are just a few examples of practices that — if done regularly — can improve our work, relationships, and mental health.

But what if those things don't come naturally to you? What does it take to build a new habit?

While there are plenty of hacks on the internet competing to answer these questions, the neuroscience behind habit formation doesn't offer shortcuts. Experts advocate for the old-fashioned approach: incremental progress. Dedicated commitment is what, time and again, has proven to lead to change.

Surprisingly, the first step towards creating long-term change involves building routines — not habits themselves.

Routines vs. Habits

Most of us assume the two are interchangeable. But Nir Eyal, author of *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*, told me that this is a common fallacy — one that tends to end in disappointment. “When we fail at forming new patterns of behavior, we often blame ourselves,” he said, “rather than the bad advice we read from someone who doesn't really understand what can and cannot be a habit.”

Eyal explained that a habit is a behavior done with little or no thought, while a routine involves a series of behaviors frequently, and intentionally, repeated. A behavior has to be a regularly performed routine before it can become a habit at all.

The problem is that many of us try to skip the “routine” phase. According to Eyal, this is because we think that habits will allow us to put tedious or unenjoyable tasks on autopilot. (Your to-do list would be so much better if it just conquered itself, somehow.)

It makes sense.

Unlike habits, routines are uncomfortable and require a concerted effort. Waking up early to run every morning or meditating for 10 minutes every night, for instance, are rituals that — initially — are hard to keep up. Habits, on the other hand, are so ingrained in our daily lives that it feels strange not to do them. Imagine not brushing your teeth before bed or not drinking a cup of coffee with breakfast. If these are habits you have already formed, avoiding them might even feel bad.

To attempt to turn a routine into a habit, take the following steps.

Set your intentions

Keep in mind that some routines may blossom into habits, but not all of them can or will. Some things, while quantifiable, require too much concentration, deliberation, and effort to make the transition. For that reason, playing an instrument, cleaning your apartment, or journaling don't fall into the habit category; they're not effortless behaviors that can be done without conscious thought.

The point is: Pick the behavior you want to turn into a habit wisely. Maybe you want to drink more water throughout the day or skip checking your email first thing in the morning. Whatever you choose, be realistic about the process. It will take patience, self-discipline, and commitment.

“There’s no such thing as 21 days to start a new habit,” Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit*, told me. “The amount of time it takes will vary from person to person.” Developing a pleasurable habit, like eating chocolate for breakfast, for instance, may take a day, while trying to exercise at 5 pm each evening may take much longer.

Ximena Vengoechea, a UX researcher and author of the forthcoming book *Listen Like You Mean It*, added, “Reflect on what you’re trying to achieve and why. Say your goal is to be a writer. Are you interested in writing a novel for fame, prestige, or for money? Is it to gain the acceptance or love of someone you care about? Or is it simply because you love the craft?”

Understanding “the why” will help you stay motivated when inevitable roadblocks to building new routines surface.

Prepare for roadblocks

Reflect on why, to date, you haven’t regularly practiced this behavior. What has stopped you in the past? Is fear or shame getting in the way? Or a lack of time?

“Familiarize yourself with your own blockers now so that you can quickly identify and manage them when they arise later on, because they will,” Vengoechea said.

Maybe a busy schedule has kept you from hitting the gym every day. To avoid this occurrence from happening in the future, block 30 to 60 uninterrupted minutes on your calendar right now. Maybe you’re just not feeling motivated enough lately. To keep yourself accountable, find an ally (or two) to share your goals with. This could be a trusted manager, peer, friend, partner, or family member.

“Make sure you share your ambitions, intentions, plans (and maybe even fears!) with someone who can support you and remind you of why you’re taking this on in the first place when the

going gets tough,” Vengoechea said. Research shows that your odds of success increase dramatically when make your intentions known to someone perceived to have a higher status than yourself or someone who’s opinion you value.

Start with nudges

You can put in place practical steps or nudges to help you kick off your new routine. Use one or all of the suggestions below to get organized and begin.

Make a schedule.

Block regular times on your calendar (every day or every other day) to practice the behavior you want to build into a habit. Be sure not to overdo it initially. “If you dive in too fast and expect results right away,” Vengoechea said, “odds are, you will fail and become discouraged before you even begin.”

Set microhabits.

In the spirit of keeping things simple, another option is to try out microhabits: incremental adjustments that (over time) move you closer to achieving your goals. Think of them like stepping-stones that lead to your final destination. Here are a few examples to give you the idea:

The goal: Read more industry-related news.

What you can do: Create Google Alerts for topics directly related or even adjacent to your career interests, prompting you to click through and read at least one or two alerts every day.

The goal: Get better quality sleep.

What you can do: Blue light from our screens hampers a good night’s sleep. Keep your favorite books beside your bed and leave your phone to charge in another room. When winding down for

the night, you'll probably choose the nearby book instead of doom-scrolling.

The goal: Strengthen your network.

What you can do: Encourage yourself to reach out to others with visual cues. Tape post-it notes with messages like “Did you show gratitude to a colleague today?” or “Reach out to someone new” to your screen as a way to remind yourself of your goal.

Try temptation bundling.

This last type of nudge aims to make obligatory tasks more enjoyable. The concept itself was coined by researcher Katie Milkman and her colleagues, and it's fairly straightforward: Take an activity you don't like to do and something you do enjoy — now, bundle them together.

In practice, here's what temptation bundling can look like: Package a behavior that gives you instant gratification (checking Instagram, listening to music, or bingeing your favorite podcast series) with a beneficial, but less fun, activity (running on the treadmill, filling out a spreadsheet, or doing chores around the house). Only allow yourself to do the “fun” thing in tandem with the “not-so-fun” thing.

In Milkman's study, for example, the researchers gave participants iPods with four audio novels they wanted to listen to but could only access while working out. By and large, participants' gym attendance increased because it was tied to an indulgence.

Show yourself compassion

Lastly, don't forget to be compassionate with yourself as you embark on this journey toward more thoughtful routines, and hopefully, better habits. Any long-term change is going to take time. That's just the reality. There will be ups and downs. But you are capable, and if you've made it this far, you are also prepared.

Let the tools you've learned today be your compass. Let them guide you when you feel off-track (which, by the way is a totally normal feeling when you're trying something new).

Now, go get started.

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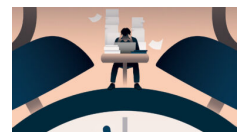
Kristi DePaul is a content creator whose writing on career navigation and personal branding has appeared in international outlets and has been cited by prominent think tanks and universities. She is founder and principal at Nuanced, a thought leadership firm for executives, and serves as CEO of Founders, a fully remote content agency focused on the future of learning and the future of work. She earned a master's degree from the H. John Heinz III College of Information Systems and Public Policy at Carnegie Mellon University.

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