

Building Healthy Habits in the New Year

As we step into 2025, many of us are filled with hopes and resolutions for the new year. While the excitement of new beginnings is palpable, the challenge of sticking to our goals often looms large. Habits are the building blocks of our daily lives. Whether they're positive, like exercising regularly, or negative, like excessive screen time, our habits shape who we are. Understanding how habits form, and how to get them to stick, is crucial for making lasting changes.

The Power of Habit

It all starts with a process known as habit formation, which can be broken down into three stages:

1. **Cue:** This is the trigger that prompts the brain to initiate a behavior. Cues can be external, like the sight of running shoe, or internal, like feelings of stress.
2. **Routine:** This is the behavior or action you take in response to the cue, aka, the habit. It can be physical (going for a run), mental (thinking positively), or emotional (practicing gratitude).
3. **Reward:** The positive reinforcement that follows the routine. This could be the feeling of accomplishment after a workout or a treat for completing a task. Rewards are crucial as they help solidify the connection between the cue and the routine, encouraging repetition.



Research shows that when you repeatedly engage in a behavior in response to a cue, the brain starts to create a neural pathway. This pathway becomes stronger each time the habit is formed, making the behavior more automatic over time. Additionally, when a habit is consistently rewarded, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and reward. This reinforces the desire to repeat the behavior, solidifying it as a habit.

5 Strategies for Building Habits that Last

1. Start Small with Habit Stacking and Embracing the 2-minute Rule

One of the most effective strategies for habit formation is called habit stacking. This involves linking a new habit to an already existing one. For example, if you want to start daily meditation practice, do it right after brushing your teeth in the morning. The existing habit of brushing your teeth serves as a cue for the new habit. Eventually, daily meditation will simply become part of your morning routine. Adopting the 2-minute rule can also help when trying to form a new habit. When you start a new habit, it should take less than two minutes to do, making it easy to get started. For instance, if you want to read more, commit to reading just one page each night before bed.

2. Set SMART Goals

SMART Goals is a framework used to set clear and achievable objectives. Using SMART criteria can help you create a clear roadmap for achieving your objectives, increasing your chance of successfully achieving the goal or developing the habit.

The SMART acronym stands for:

- *Specific*: Clearly define what the goal is and what you want to achieve.
- *Measurable*: Establish criteria for tracking progress and measuring success.
- *Achievable*: Ensure your goal is realistic and attainable.
- *Relevant*: The goal should matter to you and align with broader objectives.
- *Time-bound*: Set a deadline for achieving the goal to create a sense of urgency.

3. Use a Habit Tracker and Set Up Visual Reminders

A habit tracker can be an invaluable tool for monitoring your progress. Whether it's a physical journal or a digital app such as Habitica, tracking your habits provides visibility into your progress and helps you to maintain motivation. Setting up reminders to complete your goal can also lead to greater success. Setting a reminder on your phone, writing it in your planner, or even putting sticky notes around the house can all remind you of your goals.

4. Establish Accountability and Build Social Support

Sharing your goals and progress with others can provide motivation and encouragement. By joining a community focused on similar objectives or finding an "accountability partner", you can significantly increase your commitment to new habits. Consider setting up regular check-ins with people in your life to discuss your progress and challenges. This can help you to stay accountable and make adjustments as needed. An "accountability partner" can be anyone in your life including a family member, friend, or a coach through your Life Advisor EAP.

5. Create a Rewards System

A reward system is a powerful tool for reinforcing habits and motivating behavior. When you associate positive outcomes with specific actions, you are more likely to repeat those behaviors. This is why rewards can act as a link between the cue and routine parts of forming a habit. For example, rewarding yourself for completing a daily exercise routine or achieving a work-related goal can create a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Over time, the anticipation of rewards can enhance commitment, turning initial efforts into habits that stick.

Adopting these 5 strategies along with understanding the habit formation process can be game-changing when it comes to building habits that stick. Want some extra help achieving your goals in the new year? Our Life Advisor Coaches can assist by providing you with tools, resources, and support necessary for crushing your 2025 goals and building lasting habits!

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