

Making Lifestyle Changes That Last

You're once again feeling motivated to eat better, exercise more, drink less caffeine or make any number of the positive lifestyle changes you've been telling yourself you want to make. You've tried before — probably declaring another attempt as a New Year's resolution — but without feeling much success. Making a lifestyle change is challenging, especially when you want to transform many things at once. This time, think of it not as a resolution but as an evolution.

Lifestyle changes are a process that take time and require support. Once you're ready to make a change, the difficult part is committing and following through. So do your research and make a plan that will prepare you for success. Careful planning means setting small goals and taking things one step at a time.

Here are five tips from the American Psychological Association to help you make lasting, positive lifestyle and behavior changes:

Make a plan that will stick. Your plan is a map that will guide you on this journey of change. You can even think of it as an adventure. When making your plan, be specific. Want to exercise more? Detail the time of day when you can take walks and how long you'll walk. Write everything down, and ask yourself if you're confident that these activities and goals are realistic for you. If not, start with smaller steps. Post your plan where you'll most often see it as a reminder.

Start small. After you've identified realistic short-term and long-term goals, break down your goals into small, manageable steps that are specifically defined and can be measured. Is your long-term goal to lose 20 pounds within the next five months? A good weekly goal would be to lose one pound a week. If you would like to eat healthier, consider as a goal for the week replacing dessert with a healthier option, like fruit or yogurt. At the end of the week, you'll feel successful knowing you met your goal.

Change one behavior at a time. Unhealthy behaviors develop over the course of time, so replacing unhealthy behaviors with healthy ones requires time. Many people run into problems when they try to change too much too fast. To improve your success, focus on one goal or change at a time. As new healthy behaviors become a habit, try to add another goal that works toward the overall change you're striving for.

Involve a buddy. Whether it be a friend, co-worker or family member, someone else on your journey will keep you motivated and accountable. Perhaps it can be someone who will go to the gym with you or someone who is also trying to stop smoking. Talk about what you are doing. Consider joining a support group. Having someone with whom to share your struggles and successes makes the work easier and the mission less intimidating.

Ask for support. Accepting help from those who care about you and will listen strengthens your resilience

and commitment. If you feel overwhelmed or unable to meet your goals on your own, consider seeking help from a psychologist. Psychologists are uniquely trained to understand the connection between the mind and body, as well as the factors that promote behavior change. Asking for help doesn't mean a lifetime of therapy; even just a few sessions can help you examine and set attainable goals or address the emotional issues that may be getting in your way.

Making the changes that you want takes time and commitment, but you can do it. Just remember that no one is perfect. You will have occasional lapses. Be kind to yourself. When you eat a brownie or skip the gym, don't give up. Minor missteps on the road to your goals are normal and okay. Resolve to recover and get back on track.

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