- Habit



RESEARCH RESULTS:

How to build a new habit

If you wish to get rid of old habits and replace them with new ones, you must trick your brain. Scientists have figured out how. If you use their simple methods, even the most demanding activity can become an effortless part of your everyday life.

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SET THE ALARM

THE BRAIN LINKS TIME AND HABIT



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WHY?

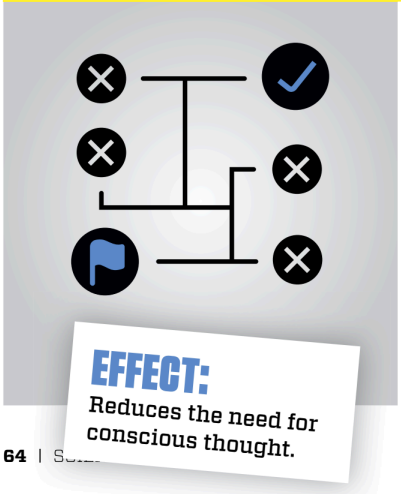
? A habit originates when the brain unconsciously begins to associate a certain time or routine with a certain behaviour. You can speed the association by always performing the desired behaviour at the same time, or as part of the same routine. In this way, the necessary connections in the brain are strengthened, so that the behaviour becomes automatic and effortless. This method is one of researchers' favourites when trying to build new habits in their test subjects.

HOW?

! If you wish to build a new habit, such as exercising, it is crucial that you consistently perform the desired behaviour at a specific time, e.g. 8 o'clock in the morning, or during or following a specific routine, e.g. after breakfast. An experiment from 2021 showed either method led to the building of a new habit in about 60 days. However, other studies have indicated that routine-based habits may be even easier to adopt than habits enforced simply by time of day.

MAKE A PLAN

A DETAILED PLAN MAKES THE HABIT MORE INSTINCTIVE



WHY?

? It seems counter-intuitive, but detailed planning is one of the most efficient methods for building new unconcious habits, according to an analysis from 2023. It was outcompeted only by a technique known as problem solving – also a type of planning, but for what to do if something gets in the way of your original plan. By planning both your habit and how to overcome potential problems, you reduce the need to consciously think about your habit.

HOW?

! A scientific overview from 2020 summarises the most important elements of planning. First of all, you write down when, where, and with whom you will perform the desired behaviour. In addition, detail how the behaviour will be performed (so if it is exercise, plan the specific exercises, intensity, duration, etc.). Finally, the plan should describe what you can do in case of challenges to your plan, whether environmental (such as bad weather) or personal (lack of motivation).

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CHANGE THE SETTING

NEW ENVIRONMENT, NEW HABITS



WHY?

Habits are linked not only to specific times or routines, but to your environment. If you wish to get rid of old habits and replace them with new ones, it can be highly effective to consider the setting. Your brain has linked your current environment with your old habits, so by changing the setting you can remove some of the factors that trigger the old ways, making it easier to lose those habits and build new ones connected to the new environment.

HOW?

You can change your environment in different ways. The most extreme would be moving to a new home or workplace – research shows that such changes help people lose old habits and build new ones. However, you can also make smaller changes. For example, research shows that you build healthy eating habits more easily if you shake things up in your kitchen, making unhealthy food more inaccessible, while healthy food is impossible to miss.

DOCUMENT THE PROCESS

KEEP A DIARY, KEEP ACCOUNTABLE – BUT TO YOURSELF



WHY?

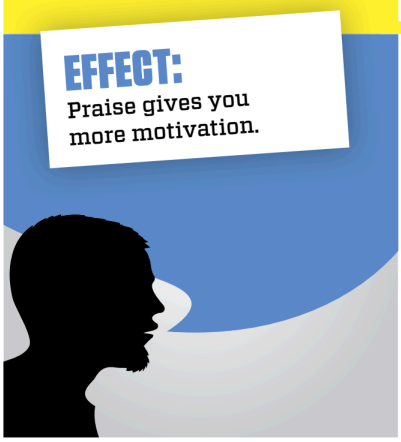
Research shows that when trying to build a new habit, giving yourself feedback is more beneficial than letting others do it. Internal feedback is achieved through a method known as self-monitoring, which involves continuously documenting your behaviour and comparing it to the goals you set. The method makes it possible to spot any challenges standing in the way of your goals and to discover unexploited opportunities that could make it easier to build the new habit.

HOW?

Self-monitoring could be a diary or a simple sheet where you record your performance, to show whether you have done all your exercises or eaten enough vegetables. You might also evaluate how close you are to your final goals, such as weight loss or improved physical fitness. Finally, you could try to assess if the new behaviour has started to require less willpower – is it becoming a habit? And importantly, come up with solutions if your notes show you are not keeping up.

TALK TO YOURSELF

YOUR OWN WORDS BOOST YOUR CONFIDENCE



WHY?

One of the challenges of building new habits is a lack of belief in yourself. There are several ways to build your confidence. One of them is to praise yourself: not only your habit-building prowess, but other qualities. Write down what you like about yourself, and even say positive things about yourself to yourself. Research demonstrates that the method, also known as self-affirmation, increases activity in brain centres related to self-confidence – and helps build new habits.

HOW?

Self-affirmation can be as simple as identifying the qualities you value in yourself and describing them in writing or saying them aloud. Think of situations where you used these qualities in practice. Research also shows that you can boost confidence, motivation and focus by talking positively to yourself while performing an exercise. This method is especially efficient when you are trying to learn a completely new type of behaviour, so use it early in the process of building a habit.

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