
Building Better Habits

Brainstorm Worksheet

How to Engage in Habit Design

What Are Your Motivations?

What drives you toward this vision? What are your reason(s) to get there? Do you want to have a more secure future? Do you want to be the owner of your own company? Do you want to set a good example for your kids or your parents? Do you want to be in less pain? Once you identify motivations, the next step is writing them down and putting them in a place where you are constantly reminded of them...

How Does YOUR Brain Respond To Making Lifestyle Changes?

(Circle or highlight in this section areas that you think best describe you.)

In working with so many different types of patients on achieving various health goals day after day, it immediately became clear to me how different we all are about engaging in solutions to achieve our goals. Virtually all people respond well to some degree of structure. Some people are very sensitive to it, and if there is “too much structure”, they quickly start to unravel! These individuals need to have more time and space to act on their own accord. Other people thrive on structure; the more guidelines and rules, the easier it is for them to make strides at work, at home and in life. The rest of us fall somewhere in the middle.

A percentage of individuals respond quickly and seamlessly to expectations. “If the doctor says I should do it, that means I need to do it, so I’m doing it...”, and that’s all there is to it. These individuals tend to make even aggressive dietary changes and implement exercise regimens relatively quickly and without too much regression. They tend to be able to maintain changes even if those around them are unsupportive. They also tend to do well with checklists and do-do lists that keep them organized and give them satisfaction that they are meeting their small and large goals.

A more common inclination is to be dependent on the deadlines and expectations set up by others. This would include individuals who are more inclined to go to the gym if their friend is going too and expects them to be there. They will do better with dietary changes if they have a support group that is relying on them for recipe ideas and emotional support through the shared process. On the flip side, they may have a very hard time making changes by themselves without any accountability. If the accountability team doesn’t follow through, or

if others make alternate demands for these individuals' limited time and energy, they will need to have a "plan B" accountability system to keep them on track. They will also need to consider how to set up firm boundaries and limits to prevent their self-care and self-health time from being endangered by others' needs and wants.

If neither of the aforementioned categories seems to describe you, you may in fact be someone who has a hard time making lifestyle changes unless they have decided there is enough "proof" warranting the healthful change in question. These individuals will likely resist "unnecessary" changes not deemed valuable enough to justify the effort, at least not yet. They may need to read or hear about a few studies proving the benefits of a dietary change before they'll bite. Personally, I read over 100 articles about mindfulness meditation before I finally said, "OK, I can't ignore the facts anymore. I need to start doing this". These individuals are often selective about rule-following in general. They are more inclined to break a rule or even a law if it doesn't seem reasonable or sensible to them.

On occasion, I work with patients who don't seem inclined to stick to any rules at all. These individuals can't really be convinced to do something by anyone, including themselves. They'll do it if they feel like doing it because they feel like doing it, and they don't necessarily need any other reason than that. Their adherence to a plan or healthy lifestyle change may be quite fickle.

Most people don't fall 100% in one category or another. For example, I tend to create and follow a structured system to help me in my professional and personal life, but I admit that certain tasks I find particularly mundane or unpleasant will bring out the side of me that requires deadlines and accountability partners in order to get it done. However, if you have an impression that you lean to one pattern over the others, that will help you identify better strategies for making healthful lifestyle modifications as well as likely pitfalls that you can protect yourself against from the get-go.

If you tend to be a super-duper rule-follower, you should incorporate a monitoring system from the start. Print out a monthly calendar to stick to the fridge, and each day that you exercise/eat well/meditate/etc, indicate your accomplishment. On the flip side, you'll want to be aware of "over-structuring". If you're sick, know and accept that you might not be able to achieve your exercise goal that day, and that's OK. If you're going on vacation, you may want to pre-authorize a break for yourself during that time so that you don't stress out about a to-do list while you're trying to be relaxed.

If you're good at getting stuff done because other people expect you to, you should incorporate an accountability team from the start. Try to include others in your lifestyle change by asking someone to join you and/or hold you accountable for your goals by

checking in on a daily or weekly basis specifically about your adherence to the plan. You will also need to design special protections for yourself from the beginning of your new endeavor in case your accountability team falls short during the goal-attainment process.

If you are a person who needs “proof” to warrant ongoing effort, you will need to clearly define your reasons for partaking on a health-improvement journey, especially at the beginning. Keep the articles you read about the benefits of exercise or eating a plant-based diet in plain sight throughout the process and revisit them often. If you watched a documentary that persuaded you to make a lifestyle change, watch it several times. Print out key points/facts about the benefits and pin them beside the bathroom mirror or your bedside so you can keep them on your mind. Be aware of your natural tendency to talk yourself out of something based on new rumblings about latest news or research.

If you simply can't stand following rules, then don't make them. If you tend to feel caged in by having to “check-in”, then your best bet for sticking to a plan will be reminding yourself frequently of your motivations. Take things one day at a time, rather than using daily or weekly monitoring systems. You will likely be better off using automatic monitoring systems that you can check whenever you want. For example, use a budgeting app on your phone to see how you're sticking to your budget whenever you want because it automatically populates your spending within categories. In contrast, you will likely not do so well with a plan requiring that you insert your spending every week into a computer budgeting program. Likewise, you likely won't do well to log your exercise into a calendar, but might do better if you just ask your gym manager to check and report to you how many times you've been to the gym in the past month.

When Brainstorming Ideas, do it with YOU in mind

If you set up your goals in a way that contradict your innate personality, you will struggle to follow through. Consider several factors as fundamentals in preparing for habit change.

What time of day are you the most motivated to achieve goals? If you are a night owl, don't plan to exercise or do meal-prep at 5am as this will likely result in a lack of adherence to your activity plan. Likewise, if you are most motivated in the morning, deciding to implement a different habit at the end of the day may set you up for failure. Your answer may not be the same for each type of goal you are pursuing. For example, I am far more likely to work-out first thing in the morning than after work. In contrast, I am more likely to adhere to a habit of daily meditation if I work it in at night. Acknowledge when you have the most motivation and energy to achieve your mission.

Do you enjoy doing new things as much as possible, or do you prefer the old and familiar? If you love exploring different cultures' cuisines, adhering to your nutrition plan may be more

exciting and enjoyable if you integrate new foods and spices into your meal-planning routine and grocery shopping. On the other hand, if you are more inclined toward the familiar, you would probably be better off picking existing favorite dishes and transforming them into healthier versions of themselves. If you are trying to entice yourself to adhere to a 4-day-per-week exercise routine and you enjoy novelty, you may find rock climbing and aerial yoga reinvigorating and fun to stick to. But if you aren't a fan of novelty, good old jogging and body-weight exercises may be a more worthwhile pursuit for you.

Do you feel good when you make a purchase, or does spending stress you out? If you are a person who finds spending money extremely stressful and unpleasant, investing \$120 per month on a specialty gym to enforce an exercise habit may result in more strife than it does improved endurance. On the flip side, if spending is within your budget and a new blender and food processor will make you excited to prepare healthy foods, then this may be a solid investment. There is a way to strike a balance, of course. If money is tight, you may need to restrict yourself regardless of your preferences. If you're such an extreme under-buyer that you're under-equipped in the necessary resources to achieve your goal, this will dampen your success.

Do you prefer to work alone or with others? Are you outwardly competitive or intrinsically-focused? Some people dislike going to gyms and bootcamps because they need more alone-time after a long day. Some people would do best to maintain their activity level if they joined a local soccer club that had weekly games and they can exercise their competitive behavior as much as their muscles. Joining challenges with co-workers or friends are great for people who enjoy the social interaction and perhaps the competitive play. But if this does not resonate with you, don't incorporate it into your habit design.

How Do You Protect Your Habits?

Remind Yourself of Your Motivations. When you're in the thick of an action plan, especially in the beginning, it's easy to quit. Change is hard. Improving your health and your life requires constant work, constant effort. It's an ongoing process. It is a normal response to question why you're doing these hard tasks and sticking to what at times may feel restrictive. I recommend that you take the motivations you already outlined and put them where you can see them: on the bathroom mirror, on the refrigerator, beside your computer monitor. It could be a picture of where you want to be. It could be a list of values or life plans. It could be the faces of your kids and grandkids. Whatever of these motivations make your brain or your heart "zing" when you see them, make sure you see them frequently.

Developing Maintenance Strategies

Habits are helpful when implemented for the long-term. If you partake in a radical dietary transformation for 3 months, do you plan on reverting back to your "old ways" when the 3

months is up and re-gain all that weight and poor health trajectory? When a “next-step strategy” is lacking, regression quickly follows. All the benefits you gained from a temporary habit are lost and our intention for lasting, sustainable change is not achieved. Starting over from scratch the next time around may feel like a bigger mountain than it did the first time. Remember that once a habit is formed, it is more stable than a non-habit, but it is certainly not unsinkable.

Pitfalls & Safeguards:

Some safeguards are implemented in the design of the new habit because you designed the new habit based on your personality and individual needs. But consider a few other safeguards to act as “life bumpers” when the ball starts rolling toward the side gutter:

Schedule your habit into your life:

If it’s not written down, it tends not to happen. Your new habit of healthy eating likely requires a few separate habits in order to achieve it: time to meal plan, buy groceries, meal prep, etc. Be realistic and budget enough time for each of these steps so that you are actually able to maintain the practice. If you need to modify something else in your schedule to accommodate it, do that.

Create a level of accountability that is right for you:

We talked about how certain individuals rely on others to hold them accountable to get things done. That said, we all benefit from that to a certain degree. Meetings and deadlines help ensure we get work projects done, our kids might be the reason we stick to waking up early in the morning to start the day, our financial advisor might hold us to our saving habits by checking in with us quarterly.

Planning for Society & Culture:

How do I maintain this new eating lifestyle, for example, and still maintain a social life? It is 100% true that we live in an environment where eating healthfully and remaining active is NOT the easier path. That said, how much this fact will deter you from accomplishing your goals is much more related to **your level of commitment**, accounting for your natural tendencies that we’ve already discussed, and how you’ve applied this knowledge to developing your new habits. Here are some general guidelines:

Eating Out or With Others

This includes other people’s homes and restaurants / take-out. Be realistic.

Do you eat out five nights per week and get lunch out 4 days per week?

- Where do you eat? Are there healthful options? If not, can you change the venue?

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- What do you typically order? Can you look at the menu ahead of time and find suitable options beforehand so that you aren't tempted once you arrive? Can you eat beforehand so that you are less hungry and will be content with a side salad?
 - Can you reduce the number of meals you eat out?
 - Are you going to someone's home to eat? Can you bring a dish with you to someone's home that you know you can eat? Can you let this person know ahead of time that you're eating differently, that way they're not offended when you bring your own dish? With a particularly toxic person giving you a hard time and as a "last resort" in a sticky situation, blame your doctor for having to eat healthier.

Struggling With Time

If you are struggling to "find the time" to achieve an action step: literally go through your day and figure out exactly how you are spending each piece of your day. There are almost zero examples from my practice where there literally was no time for healthful change. It's more about **committing to allocating your time differently** so that you can fulfill your commitment to yourself and others.

That said, if time is a struggle, problem-solve. For example: You may not be able to prepare a home-cooked meal on your own from scratch every night because of your family's schedule, but you may be able to do it if you:

- a) prep on Sunday for the week,
- b) subscribe to a meal kit delivery service for part of the week or
- c) involve your spouse to either help with food prep / grocery shopping (watch out for over-relying on others!) OR performing other household tasks that frees up more of your time for the meal-prep. Maybe your spouse picks up the kids on Fridays after soccer practice so that you can complete your meal-planning. Maybe we allocate weekly sweeping and mopping to the kids so that you have extra time to prep meals, etc.

Likewise, you may be able to dedicate time to exercise if you:

- a) do a 20 minute video in the living room (aka no commute time),
- b) take a walk after dinner *with* your spouse or kids so you are still having family bonding time,
- c) brisk walking outdoors while catching up on phone calls to friends and family that you needed to make anyway

When there is commitment, there is always a way.

Struggling With Work/CoWorkers

A lot of bad eating habits come from unhealthy work environments. People are over-stressed, tired, and constantly bringing treats into the office. Some co-workers may also be critical of

people who are trying to employ healthier habits. The most effortless way to mitigate other people's attitudes and undermining is to "blame the doctor". I tell patients to do this all the time to get out of being questioned about their eating habits. "My doctor says I have to because of an issue I have going on". While this is a good back-pocket option, **I would encourage you to consider being honest about your motivations and efforts because it may have a cascade of positive effect on others** around you who are also looking within for motivation to achieve a similar goal.

Other options include creating accountability partners at work and/or having your outside-accountability partners touch base during the work-day. You might also make sure you have prepared enough of what you need so that you're not "hangry" and easily tempted at work. Last but not least, just say no. Stick to your guns.

What to do about unsupportive partners

This is the hardest one, I think. Most of us need support. This is why including your partner on your health journey from the beginning is a great idea. Invoking communication is key too. If they have reservations or appear unsupportive, ask them what concerns they have about you embarking on the challenge of healthier way of living. What are they worried about? Are there concerns that can be addressed up front? Are they willing to support you if not participate themselves? Are they willing to take a larger role in prepping their own meals if they do not want to eat healthier? Is your partner willing to help in other ways, like pick up the kids from school more frequently so that you can go to exercise class a few days per week? If this support is not possible to get from your partner, your external accountability structure will be more crucial to develop.

Temptations

We are all tempted. All the time. As I mentioned earlier, eating mindfully and healthfully in America is an uphill battle. It is simply not the easier path. Advertisers make their money by drawing you into and ultimately getting you to succumb to temptations. The less-healthy humans around you inadvertently use the same tactics as advertisers do by the following tricks: appealing to your need for comfort and nostalgia (e.g. offering you a food you loved as a kid), telling you that you deserve this unhealthy food (e.g. Valentine's Day chocolates), making you feel badly for not eating the unhealthy food ("what are you, a health nut?", "just eat a burger", "it's unhealthy to let this rule your life"). Similarly, having a bad day, being stressed will all result in you being tempted to throw in the towel and break your new habit.

A few examples:

Eating Healthfully When at home:

- Frankly, it's easiest when the whole family is on board. If there is junk food in the house, you will be inclined to eat it, and that's that. If your family is not fully on board, but is

willing to make a few compromises for your success, they may be willing to set up a second fridge and cupboard in the garage or basement for the foods that you are eliminating so that they are neither visible nor accessible to you. This is often very effective.

- Always have healthy food on hand. Go grocery shopping at least once per week, more if needed. Prep “snack” foods ahead of time. Cut carrots and celery sticks, have freshly washed blueberries and cherry tomatoes ready in the fridge to grab on a moment’s notice.
- Have your motivations for habit change in multiple places where you can see them and return to them when you’re having a hard time.
- Have books, documentaries and healthy cookbooks easily accessible to re-watch/read regularly to maintain inspiration and motivation.

When not at home:

- Try to eat ahead of an outing so that you are full at least at the start.
- Bring easy snacks (mentioned above). Fruits and veggie sticks travel super easily.
- Keep a few teabags in your purse so that you can socialize with a friend or coworker without getting a calorie-dense, unhealthy beverage.
- Get to know where and when you’ll be eating when you’re out. Do you need to bring a meal? Do you need to check out a restaurant menu ahead of time?

It’s easy to come up with excuses not to make healthful changes. See if you can combat these voices by questioning them: “This is hard” - *yes it is, but I can do it anyway*. “This is impossible” - *but is it?* “This seems overly-restrictive” - *for good reason? Compared to what? What are the alternatives?*

Holidays & Vacation

You may need to loosen the reins a little on vacation. In fact, sometimes it’s obligatory because your current routine might not exist somewhere else. You may not have access to a gym. You may not be able to find certain kinds of food on a regular basis. But it’s important not to see holidays and vacations as a reason to “drop everything” and return to unhealthy habits. When you do that, you make it so much harder to resume successful patterns once the vacation is over (most of the time). Keep in mind that just because you can’t stick to your exact-same routine, doesn’t mean you have no choice but to turn a 180. Just because there aren’t as many fresh fruits and vegetables available doesn’t mean you should have bagels and cream cheese. Just because you don’t have access to a gym doesn’t mean you should sit down and not move for a week.

If you turn a 180, you are only hurting yourself.

Structured individuals should prioritize reducing structure on vacation as this can be a major hindrance to them. All types will do well to consider the trip or change in environment they

will be embarking on and what aspects of their action steps may be harder to maintain. Once you anticipate them, you can set up systems to protect you. Maybe you will be a lot more active with fewer healthy options around for meals, so you'll want to bring non-perishable healthier snack options with you so you don't end up bingeing on junk food. Maybe you won't have access to the regular type of gym you use, so you contemplate what type of exercise you could implement while on vacation. For example, commit to a long walk every day with your partner, or a few light jogs on the beach by yourself while listening to music.

Monitor your progress

The frequency of monitoring can be tailored to fit your brain's needs. Some of us need to monitor daily; some weekly; some monthly; some randomly (Wild Types). But it's important to compare from where we started to how we've progressed. If we're failing to make progress, it helps to know that sooner than later. If we are making progress, it feels good to acknowledge that.

And if you "fall off the wagon", get right back on it.

Life happens. Things come up. Progress takes time and ongoing effort.
But as they say, "Rome wasn't built in a day".

What Habit do I want to form?			
My Personality Type			
I'm good at following rules	I Require Accountability	I need "Proof" to convince me to change	I'm a Rebel
Level of Structure I Prefer			
I benefit from a lot of structure	I need some structure, but not too much	I hate structure and it negatively affects me.	I'm not sure
Personalizing My Design			
I am a: morning lark or night owl	I like the: new & exotic old & familiar	I hate spending money. I enjoy spending money.	I tend towards: solitude being social
Brainstorming: <i>How might this knowledge about myself affect my habit design?</i>			
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Identifying Obstacles		Identifying Solutions & Safeguards	
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What Resources are at my disposal to encourage my success, and or continue to inspire me to stick with it?

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Putting it All Together

What Habit do I want to form?	What challenges to I anticipate in implementing it?	Given these challenges, what strategies will I employ to ensure my success?
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