

# Creating Real Behavioural Change.

**Do you often find yourself struggling to change your habits, even when willing and determined to reach your goals? If you do, you are not alone.**

We are creatures of habit. Habitual behaviour tends to occur automatically, without much conscious control. Such behaviour is formed through repetitive action and can be formed intentionally and unintentionally. This means that even though old habits can be difficult to shake, it is possible to consciously change them and form new habits that serve us better. However, making a resolution to change and setting goals towards that change is much easier than sticking with it long-term. Creating lasting behavioural change requires time, effort, and a readiness to change. This resource provides evidence-based tips on how to make changes you can stick with.

## **Focus on one goal at a time.**

It can be tempting to try and make multiple changes at a time. However, if you try to change everything all at once, you are likely to get overwhelmed and fall back into old habits. If you want to create sustainable change, focus on one goal at a time and break that goal into small, clear, and manageable steps.

Once you have made the change into a habit, you can focus on your next goal.

## **Make sure your goal is attainable.**

Make sure that your goal is realistic and not overambitious. To help you determine this, you can ask yourself the following questions: What am I expecting to gain? What might prevent me from reaching my goal? What resources and skills might I need, and do I currently possess them? How much control do I have over what I am trying to change?

For example, your goal might be to reduce your stress levels, because they are negatively impacting on your health. You might not have any control over the occurrence of stressful events, but you can control how you react by developing stress-management techniques (e.g. practicing mindfulness for 10 minutes a day).



## **Ensure that your goal is meaningful to you.**

What value does this goal hold for you? How important would it be for you to achieve it? Does it align with your core values? Our reasons or motivations for change are important predictors of our behaviours. If the reason for change is not sufficiently important to you, you are less likely to commit to it.

## **Learn as much as you can about the behaviour you are trying to adopt.**

Consult credible sources (e.g., your GP, mental health professional, peer-reviewed journals, etc.) about the benefits or drawbacks for you. For example, we have all heard about the benefits of exercise, but this might not mean that every type of exercise will be beneficial for you. If you experience chronic pain, it might be more beneficial for you to aim for low intensity exercise. Making informed decisions and knowing the benefits you can gain from reaching your goal can keep you motivated.

## **Monitor your behaviour.**

Check in with yourself around what behaviours are getting you closer to your goal and which are not. Keeping a journal can help with this. Note your behaviour and accompanying thoughts and feelings. Might you be engaging in particular behaviour when sad or stressed, which moves you away from your goal? Do not suppress your thoughts or feelings, as this will only strengthen the habit you are trying to change. Notice your reactions and make small steps to stay on track.

## **Allow yourself time.**

Be patient with yourself and the change process. Sometimes it can take months, or longer, to move from thinking about behaviour change to preparing for the change to finally taking action.

## **Celebrate success.**

Don't forget to celebrate your small successes. Reward yourself as you progressively reach the incremental goals you have set for yourself. However, make sure that the rewards you choose are consistent with your goal and maintain your progress. For example, if you have managed to replace half of the junk food you usually eat with vegetables this month, do not reward yourself with junk food, reward yourself with a delicious healthy meal out with family or friends, or by buying that item you have been eyeing in the store.

