



Making the habit of a lifetime

“Habits are first cobwebs, then cables”
(Spanish proverb)

*Deciding to adopt a healthier lifestyle isn't difficult – the real challenge for most of us lies in maintaining it, says Chinnor-based personal trainer, **Hilary Westall**. Here she looks at why we often fail to change our existing habits for more positive and healthy ones, despite our good intentions, and how we can all stick to our resolutions a little more resolutely!*

Ever made a new year's resolution and managed to stick to it for longer than a few weeks? Most good intentions to get in shape, lose weight, and so on, have usually got up and gone altogether by Easter – if you even make it that far. We've all been there: breaking old habits and creating better ones is straightforward enough isn't it? So why do we so easily slip back into our old ways, trading our new and healthy habits for familiar, though perhaps less desirable ones?

Habits determine our health, yet many of us are simply not motivated enough to change them. If you want to make real and long term changes, the following principles can be followed across all areas of your life, not just in your health.

What do you want to achieve?

Do you want to start running or lose half a stone? Do you want to get into the habit of eating breakfast every day? A clear, written goal will help you see where you are heading.

Why do you want to achieve it?

Be specific about what changing your behaviour will really mean for you. “I want to lose weight,” isn't really enough on its own. However, “I want to lose 14lbs so that I look and feel better and have more energy to run around with my children,” is more specific.

It takes 21 days to make a habit

Experts agree that it takes a minimum of 21 days to make a habit. So, set yourself a start date, count ahead 21 days and mark that date. Now make the commitment to follow your plan for a minimum of

21 days. If you are consistent for long enough, your behaviour will become habit – you won't even need to think about it.

David Crowe (pictured), from Thame, who has just turned 50, is involved in behaviour change in both his work as a business coach and, more recently, in his personal life. He committed to working out five days a week and is still going strong many weeks later.

He says: “One of the key principles of behaviour change is that you've really got to want to do it. Part of this depends on your belief that you can.”

So, taking David's point, ask yourself the question he often uses with clients: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do I want this change?” Failure can be the result of a lack of real desire and motivation to make the change, or of not believing you could really achieve it in the first place.

Getting going

- Make your goal a priority: Book your workout times in your diary, just as you would a dentist or doctor's appointment, and commit to sticking to it.

- Create distractions for difficult times: If you are struggling to give up your mid afternoon chocolate bar, try to change your routine at that time of day so you don't think about it.

- Recruit helpers: Tell friends and family why you are making changes and ask for their support. Be assertive with people who try to sabotage your efforts and remember that they may be jealous of your willpower, especially if they have none!

- Reward yourself: Tell yourself you are making progress. Allow for the occasional relapse without labelling yourself a failure

– if you do slip up, remind yourself of your reasons for change and get back on track again.

- Be realistic about results: Think long term. As an example, weight loss should be no more than 1-2lbs per week, and gains in fitness and changes in body shape and tone can take a few weeks to really see.

If you are serious about changing your habits for more healthy ones, then you need to be consistent if you want to succeed. Fatigue, boredom and stress can make it difficult to stick to your programme, but if you follow the principles above, then you're on the road to sustained behaviour change and a healthier, happier future. Says David, “I know I'm not there yet, but I don't think anything worth having comes easily. There's no good reason to stop and every reason to keep going – I just have to keep telling myself that and keep in mind the huge progress I've already made.”

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To view David Crowe's blog with more on behaviour change, visit his website at www.crowe-associates.co.uk.



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