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HOW TO MAKE CHANGES THAT LAST

It's never too late to make lifestyle changes that are going to give you a better chance of living a longer, healthier life. Nutrition experts **Rose Carr and Caitlin Reid** suggest how to set realistic goals

THE IDEAL QUICK fix for any of life's troubles would be a magic wand but, unfortunately, if we want something to change, it's up to us to make it happen – and in most cases it's not likely to happen overnight. Many of us, for example, embrace fad diets to lose those extra kilos in a couple of weeks. The weight loss might happen initially, but a few months later we find we've regained the weight – plus a few extra kilos.

Slow and steady is the way to lasting change, and while the changes may be small at first, they can still make a big difference to your overall health and wellbeing.

MOTIVATORS FOR CHANGE

Chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease are all linked to lifestyle factors such as inactivity, unhealthy eating habits, stress, excessive alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking. When you

consider these lifestyle factors are well-known causes of disease, you'd think this alone would be enough incentive to make lifestyle changes. However, for many of us, the possibility of what's going to happen in 10 or 15 years' time isn't what motivates us to make changes today. Instead we choose to act for immediate satisfaction: what we look like and how we feel right now are often more motivating than the possibility of developing a chronic disease in the future.

Most of us want to look better, feel better, sleep better, have more energy and perform better at work. And while many of us know exactly what we want, we still find it hard to make the desired changes. We try the same approaches over again, keep falling short of our goals and are left feeling discouraged and wondering what went wrong. If we want to achieve the desired results, we need to do something different.

PSYCHOLOGY OF CHANGE

The first thing to know about making any type of change is it's not a single event you never have to think about again. Making any change is a process involving seven distinct stages:

- 1. Precontemplation:** you have no intention of changing in the next six months.
- 2. Contemplation:** you intend to change, but not soon.
- 3. Preparation:** you intend to change in the next month.
- 4. Action:** you've made recent changes.
- 5. Maintenance:** you've maintained the changes for six months.
- 6. Termination:** you've maintained the changes for five years.
- 7. Relapse:** you've returned to your old ways.

The key to making successful changes is to identify the stage of change you're in. Each stage of change requires different





strategies to ensure you progress to the next stage and eventually achieve termination.

SEVEN STEPS TO CHANGE

This is your step-by-step guide to making the small changes that will make a huge difference.

1. Precontemplation

If you're in stage one, you're oblivious to the fact a problem exists. For example, your clothes feel tighter, but instead of losing some weight, you buy the next size up, or you ignore the dietary changes recommended by your doctor after another high blood pressure reading. You're in denial or just not willing to change and therefore have no plans to change


your eating patterns in the future. When in this stage, you may have little understanding about the consequences of your unhealthy habits, or you may have unsuccessfully tried to change in the past and become demoralised.

If you're in this stage you'll need to increase your awareness of the issues. Try to find out as much as you can about weight gain, high blood pressure or whatever health issue relates to you, so you can assess your situation as well as your values and beliefs.

2. Contemplation

You're aware that a problem exists and intend to do something about it... eventually. For the time

being, you've given no serious thought or commitment to making the change and you keep putting it off. If you're in this stage you may be struggling mentally with the amount of effort needed to overcome the problem or you may be feeling discouraged by previous failures.

To move through this stage, it's important for you to identify the pros and cons of making the desired change. If there are more cons than pros, you need to identify the barriers and develop some strategies to overcome them. Discuss your desire for change with friends and family, as they may be able to suggest some great ways to overcome the barriers. 

3. Preparation

This is the stage where determination sets in – you're committed to making the change and intend to take action soon. You're starting to do the preliminary work; for example, checking your local gym to decide which one to join, or beginning to read food labels so you can make healthier choices.

It's tempting to rush straight into action mode, but it's important to plan. This stage will see you doing a lot of decision-making and also involves putting goals together. Remember, it's the small steps that help you go the distance, so try to be as realistic as possible.

If you think this sounds like the phase you're in, congratulations – you're one stage away from action.

4. Action

Here you put theory into practice – you're attempting to overcome a problem by actively modifying areas of your life. You might be making different food choices or you may have joined a gym or sporting group.

During this stage it's important to have people around you who can support you. You also need to monitor your progress. Every week, write a checklist of the things you plan to accomplish and tick them off as you go. This makes you feel accountable and more likely to achieve them. It's also important to develop a plan to overcome any barriers that creep up on you along the way.

5. Maintenance

Here you acknowledge how far you've come and that you still have some work to do – you need to turn these initial changes into lifelong habits. Initially, it can take some effort to maintain lifestyle changes such as weight loss. For some people, this stage can continue for months or even years.

Hurdles will come up during the maintenance stage, so it's important to develop strategies to overcome them. If you're exercising in the evening, take your gym gear to work in case you have to work back late – you can go straight to the gym after work.

6. Termination

Congratulations, you've reached the ultimate goal! You've maintained your changes for at least five years and they're now second nature to you. This doesn't mean you can revert back to your old ways, though, as changes such as weight management can require lifelong maintenance.

7. Relapse

Nobody is perfect, so if you have the occasional relapse, don't worry too much about it. Relapse and failure are not the same thing. If you hadn't made real changes, you couldn't have relapsed in the first place. Relapse is about learning from your slip-ups and finding strategies to avoid them happening again.

With every relapse you learn more about yourself. It's important not to get discouraged during

this stage. It's a good time to look back on your list of pros and cons, reminding yourself why you wanted to change in the first place. Make sure all barriers are identified. You may need to develop new strategies to overcome unexpected events.

You should now be able to determine the current stage you're at and know how to progress through the cycle.

SMARTEN UP

When you've reached the preparation stage, it's important to properly plan your next steps. Plan what changes you want to make, then develop goals that will enable you to be successful.

When you set goals, it's important to make them SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-based.

Specific: set a well-defined goal. A general goal could be "get into shape", but a specific goal is "join a gym and work out three times a week".

Measurable: establish criteria so you can measure your progress. This will help you stay on track, reach your target dates and boost your motivation for achievement.

Attainable: set goals that are within your limits. Set small short-term goals that are achievable so you have a sense of progress. Goals that are too hard to achieve may make you lose motivation altogether.

Realistic: this means do-able, not easy. You know you can



Setting smart goals

GENERAL GOAL:

"I'm going to start exercising next week."

SMART GOAL:

"I'm going to start running for 30 minutes three times a week, starting on Monday 4 February.

I'll tick off my runs in my diary as I complete them."

achieve the goal and it's not an impossibility.

Time-based: a goal should have a deadline; without one, it's easy to lose motivation. Set yourself an achievement date or document how long it takes you to achieve small changes so you have an idea of how long it will take you to achieve your final goal.

CHANGING FACE

Now that you know how to move through the various stages of change and set SMART goals for a healthier you, there are still some important pointers to remember along the way:

- **Positive goals:** thinking positively can make all the

difference – it can drive you to succeed. Changing your thinking is not hard to do, it just takes practice. Instead of saying, "I will not skip breakfast every day", make your goal positive by saying "I will eat breakfast every day".

- **Record your goals:** write all your goals down and put them somewhere you won't forget. Set dates in your diary for when you want to achieve your goals. This makes you accountable. Refer to your goals daily, and review and update them along the way.

- **Small steps:** slow and steady wins the race, so take small steps towards your goals. Impatience will work against you. Setting too many goals initially or setting

unrealistic goals can both lead to failure. Be practical – if you want to lose 10kg, it's not going to happen in two weeks, so don't set this as your deadline. Make it a long-term goal and aim to lose just 1kg in the next two weeks.

- **Find support:** tell someone else about your goals and get them to check up on your progress.

Another way to get support is to include someone else in your goal – ask a friend to go walking with you or ask your family to eat the same healthy meals as you.

- **Keep a checklist:** use the checklist on page 24 to make sure you've included all the important pointers in your goals. Keep the checklist on your fridge and tick it off as you go.

- **Reward yourself:** this is a must. If you've been completing your exercise program diligently, buy yourself some new workout clothes. If you changed your eating habits, reward yourself with a non-stick frying pan. If you've given up smoking, book yourself in for a massage. Rewarding yourself is a great way to reinforce your changes; just try not to reward yourself with food.



“It is better to make many small steps in the right direction than to make a great leap forward only to stumble backward.”

– Chinese proverb

CHECKLIST FOR CHANGE

CUT THIS PAGE OUT AND KEEP IT ON YOUR FRIDGE TO HELP YOU STAY MOTIVATED

- Determine which stage of change you're at: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance or termination.
- Develop strategies to help you move from one stage to the next such as identifying all pros and cons.
- Set your plan for change.
- Set specific goals.
- Set goals that are measurable.
- Set goals that are attainable.
- Set goals that are realistic.
- Set time-based goals.
- Write your goals down somewhere easily visible so you're constantly reminded.
- Set small goals that have a long-term focus.
- Set goals that are positive, not negative.
- Determine ways to assess your progress.
- Get support from family and friends.
- Review your progress each fortnight or month – have you accomplished your goals?
- Set new SMART goals or redefine existing ones.
- Reward yourself for achieving your goal (with non-food-based rewards, of course!).
- Relapse is normal. Take a breath, learn what you can, then get back to your goal.



• **Compound effect:** though some changes such as changing from full-cream to low-fat milk may seem insignificant, ultimately they all add up. Combine that small milk change with 30 minutes of daily exercise and low-fat cooking and it's bound to give you better results than simply just exercising.

FOLLOW-UP

As you progress to success, it's important to review, monitor and redefine your goals. Check your progress fortnightly or monthly – whichever works best for you. With SMART goals, you can easily measure whether you've accomplished what you set out to achieve – did you run three times a week for 30 minutes or did you only make two runs?

If you've succeeded with your goals, congratulations! It's now time to mix it up a bit. Set new goals and maintain your old ones. For example, you may wish to add a yoga class to your three weekly jogs.

If you haven't met your goals, ask yourself whether the goals you set were realistic. Don't get discouraged – you haven't failed, you just need to find a new way to overcome the barrier to your success. For example, if you had too many things on during the evenings to fit in 30 minutes of exercise, take your gym gear to work and jog during your lunch hour instead.

Success may simply be a matter of rewriting and downsizing your goals so they're achievable; for example, it may be that you can jog only once a week for the next two weeks. That's great! Achieve that goal and you should have the confidence and motivation to follow it with a bigger goal. It's the small steps that lead to the lifelong changes you desire. Here's to the new you! **HFG**