**Behaviour Change Starter Kit**

*And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom – Anais Nin*

Changing habits is difficult! The purpose of this kit is to simplify the process and to help you to get started.

First, decide on *one* area of your life you’d like to change. Why just one? Because willpower is a limited resource. Like a tank of gas, we have a [limited supply](https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/willpower-limited-resource.pdf) of it. If we make too many changes at once, we run the risk of losing control and backsliding.

**Defining One Goal**

Name one specific change you’d like to make in the next 3-6 months:

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Why is this goal important to you?

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How ready are you to pursue this goal?

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**Positive Visualization Exercise**

*Anything you can hold firmly in your imagination can be yours – William James*

Our brains have an incredible capacity to visualize the future and consider different options. However, this forward-thinking capacity often causes difficulties because it tends to over predict negative outcomes (called a *negative bias*). That being said, we can harness our positive visualization skills to increase our ability to perform better.

If we direct our attention to a thought or visualization repeatedly, it forms new neural pathways in our brain (called *self-directed neuroplasticity*). High performance athletes and performers have been harnessing the power of positive visualization to achieve better performance. When we focus our attention on a goal, we carve a new pathway on our brain and override the automatic negative patterns we have created. However, we have to visualize the positive state 4-5 times more frequently in order to override the power of the negative bias.

Set a timer for 2 minutes, close your eyes, and imagine that you’ve reached your goal. How will you be feeling? How will you be acting? Try to amplify these positive feelings as much as possible in the next two minutes – go!

What did you notice?

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How would you describe your overall vision for yourself?

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**Change Plan**

*Every good that is worth possessing must be paid for with strokes of daily effort – William James*

While we tend to remember dramatic success stories, the truth is that most sustainable change is a slow process that involves making small changes, experiencing successes and setbacks, and continuing to improve. Although you can complete multiple tasks at once, the emphasis should be on implementing the changes into your life.

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| **Task** | **Date** | **Notes** |
| 1. Write down your reasons for change and review them daily. |  |  |
| 1. Identify the top situations that would lead to a setback make a plan to manage temptation (e.g., boredom). |  |  |
| 1. Find a way to track your progress and set aside 30 minutes each week to review your progress. |  |  |
| 1. Find an accountability partner and connect to an online community. |  |  |
| 1. Make a list of activities to help cope with boredom and start a new hobby. Post it somewhere. |  |  |
| 1. Complete the *Negative Thinking Exercise*. |  |  |

**Addressing Roadblocks**

What could get in your way?

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| * A lack of willpower * Negative thinking patterns * Reactions of others * Self-judgment * Busyness / Overcommitment * Unstructured environment * Cravings * Boredom * A lack of motivation * Self-worth issues |

**Willpower**

Willpower is a skill we can develop, but it fatigues like a muscle. It’s important to note that when you are learning new skills and avoiding temptations, this is an emotionally and physically exhausting process. It’s important to give yourself time to recover in between tasks to recover and cut back in other areas. A secret weapon you can use to conserve your willpower is taking a few minutes every night to plan your next day. This helps because the less decisions you have to make during the day, the more willpower you conserve.

*Willpower tends to develop as we*

* Push our limits in a reasonable way (willpower depletion)
* Allow time to recover. Rest, motivation, positive thinking, and humour can all boost self-control (willpower restoration)
* Re-set intentions and try again (willpower growth)

**Overall tips**

* Making changes requires time and energy. It’s useful to review your schedule before you get started and see if there is anything you can cut back on.
* Don’t get too discouraged if you have a setback as this is extremely common. Try to learn from it and keep going.
* Focus on creating new positive goals and things to look forward to. This redirects your attention away from obsessing about the behaviour you are changing.
* Make one small change and practice it for 3-4 weeks. Add another small change when the previous goal becomes more of a habit.

**Negative Thinking Patterns**

*The greatest weapon against stress is the ability to choose one thought over another – William James*

It is estimated that we think about ***70,000-90,000* thoughts** per day, and most of them are the same thoughts as yesterday! As we are already aware, our bias toward negativity can distort our thinking and greatly impact our mood.

Persistent negative thinking and beliefs can sabotage our progress, and greatly diminish our self-worth. The first step to addressing our thinking is being able to identify the patterns that impact us the most. Take a look at these thoughts and beliefs and identify the ones you resonate the most with and complete the exercise at the bottom of the page.

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| [**Cognitive Distortions**](https://www.apsu.edu/sites/apsu.edu/files/counseling/COGNITIVE_0.pdf) | **Unhealthy Thought** | **Healthy Thought** |
| **1. Permission giving** | * I’ll just have a little… * I’ve done well lately so maybe I can reward myself with the behaviour I am avoiding. | * In the past I have not able to control my behaviour so it’s best not to start. * This kind of thinking leads me back to where I started. |
| **2. Black and white thinking** | * This plan doesn’t work. * I messed up so I might as well give up. | * Change is a process that involves trial and error. * I don’t need to give up because I’ve had a bad day. |
| **3. Fortune telling** | * I won’t be able to do this. * These cravings will last forever. * Something bad will happen to me if I get what I want. | * This is new territory and it will take time to develop a new normal. * This discomfort is a temporary part of adapting to a new normal. * There is no evidence to suggest that getting what I want will lead to losing it. |
| **4. Unhelpful rules** | * I must always put the needs of others before myself. * The process of change needs to be complicated and difficult. | * I can learn to take care of myself while taking care of others. * It is more effective to approach change moderately and try to enjoy the process. |
| **5. Emotional reasoning** | * I feel hopeless; therefore, this won’t work. | * All feelings come and go, and I’m learning to surf the waves. |
| **6. Should statements** | * I should be further along by now. * I shouldn’t have to struggle with such a basic issue. | * I would be much worse off if I had never started this journey. * Many people are experiencing difficulty managing behaviours and at least I’m trying to do something about it. |

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| **Negative Belief** | **Healthy Belief** |
| * I don’t deserve to be happy. | * This is an old belief that doesn’t serve me anymore. I may not feel deserving yet, but I know that it’s possible to feel better about myself. |
| * If I improve myself, I will betray my friends and family. | * I am responsible for taking care of myself, and I can’t control the reactions of others. |
| * I can’t do this. | * I am experiencing some self-doubt, but there’s no reason I can’t be successful if I keep working at it. |

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| **Reframing Negative Thoughts and Beliefs** | |
| * My top negative thoughts or beliefs: |  |
| * What are the impacts of these thoughts on your life? |  |
| * What would you *rather* think or believe? |  |

**Reactions from others**

Sometimes, others react negatively to our changes. When we make a change, it can upset the status quo in relationships, leading to fear or jealousy from peers and family. There are positive ways to deal with negative reactions from others:

* Listen non-defensively and see if there is some truth in what they are saying.
* If parts of their feedback apply, try to take it in without being unkind to yourself.

*If their reaction is harsh or unwarranted…*

* Try to have empathy for the person’s intentions and depersonalize their reactions. The way people interact in the world is often a patterned way of relating that is not created by you. Remembering this can help you to let go of some of the negative reactions you are having.

If the person is actively sabotaging your efforts to change or is making it difficult, you may need to set some boundaries to protect your progress.

**Self-Judgment**

*The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.  
― Carl R. Rogers*

As human beings, we are constantly taking in information and making emotional evaluations of our perceptions. The emotions we experience help us to make decisions about our lives, but we also experience judgments about our emotions. For example, if I am short with a family member, I may experience shame because my behaviour does not fit with my values. For many of us, we possess an inner critic that judges our emotional reactions, calling us weak or telling us that we shouldn’t be feeling this way. These inner criticisms can lead to shame and further distancing from others. The judgments that we have of our reactions is called second arrow in Buddhist psychology. The first arrow is our initial reaction. So if I had felt frustrated with a family member, the first arrow would represent my anger, and the shame I felt because of my reaction would be the second arrow.

While we cannot control our emotional experiences, we can learn how to skillfully work with them over time. Through accepting our emotional experience, we can remove the second arrow of judgment and shame and free up more capacity to decide how to respond. Being able to accept our emotional responses while working toward change allows us to be able to make changes in our lives more efficiently. I’ve seen many people learn to work with their inner critics in ways that allow them to free up more emotional space and live more fully.

**Motivation**

This is a tough area for many people! I find that motivation to change often waxes and wanes depending on many factors like social influence, willpower depletion, and expectations. When we recognize we have a need but are on the fence about making a change, we are at the **contemplation** stage. Here are some techniques that are designed to help you tip the balance toward change:

* Making a list of your reasons for change and reviewing it regularly
* Reflecting on what will happen if you *don’t* change
* Seeking out success stories from others

**Final Thoughts**

One of the best pieces of advice on change I received was from a man who quit using crystal meth after using for 20 years. When I asked him how he did it, he said, “try not to think about it and keep busy.” If I were to summarize behaviour change in a nutshell, this would be it! Although this advice seems obvious, he highlighted two essential aspects of making behaviour change. First, in order to create new neural pathways, we have to avoid thinking about the old habit (even thinking about an addictive substance can release pleasure chemicals in the brain!). Second, we also have to pursue new habits that give our life pleasure and purpose.

I would also strongly recommend connecting with a community of like-minded people who are on the same path (e.g., support groups, social media). By hearing the stories of others in our position, we can feel validated and inspired to persevere.

Just in case I haven’t emphasized this enough – change is a process that encompasses setbacks ☺. It’s important to keep trying and use yourself as your own test subject. Try different things, make notes, and adjust regularly. As the Japanese proverb goes: “fall down seven times, get up eight.”

I wish you all the best on your change journey!

Christina

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| **Books**  *Atomic Habits – James Clear*  *Willpower –* Roy Baumeister + John Tierny  *Change Anything –* Kerry Patterson + Joseph Grenny  *The Power of Full Engagement –* Jim Joehr + Tony Schwartz | **Videos**  [Change anything: Al Switzler](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TX-Nu5wTS8)  [Willpower book summary](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0e6KA8iD0k) | **Apps**  Momentum habit tracker  Productive habit tracker  Quit that! (habit tracker)  Mindset |