

Nurturing Well-being: Habits, Connections, and Self-Care Strategies

Your journey towards overall well-being is essential for not only your own happiness but also for the positive impact you make in the lives of others. The following strategies will help you swap bad habits for good ones, foster healthy social connections, and practice self-care while caring for others.

Six Little-Known Tips to Successfully Change Habits

In our modern, fast-paced lives, the pursuit of personal growth and wellness is a goal shared by many. Yet, despite our best intentions, breaking old habits and establishing new, positive ones can prove challenging. Whether you're aiming to adopt a healthier lifestyle, improve productivity, or enhance your overall well-being, understanding the art of habit change is essential to success.

What are habits?

Habits are things people do regularly and often, usually without even being aware that they are being done. Examples of habits may include taking a specific route to your workplace, checking your phone, hitting the snooze button when you wake up, and setting your bag, coat, or shoes in a particular spot when you get home. Habits can be both good and bad, depending on how they affect our health and well-being. For example, if you are staying up late every night despite having to wake up early for work in the morning, you might feel tired while trying to work or study the next day.

Habits, as defined in psychology, are automatic actions triggered by contextual cues associated with their performance. Through repetition, habits become automatic and require minimal cognitive involvement. For example, buckling a seat belt when getting in the car is a habitual response to the contextual cue of entering a vehicle.

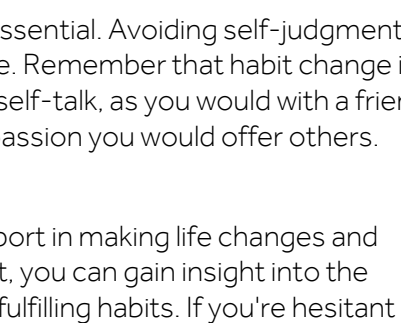
Our habits are thought to be evolutionary strategies that enable us to focus more efficiently on tasks that require our attention.

Despite the evolutionary advantage that habits may provide for our mental capacity to process information, humans can develop habits that are not necessarily to their benefit. At a certain point, these habits can cause detrimental effects to our mental and physical health or simply get in the way of accomplishing our goals.

Just as repetition likely caused your current habits to form or become ingrained, repeating new behaviours may help you form new habits. The following tips may help you replace unhelpful habits with others that serve you more.

Tips to replace unhelpful habits with more beneficial ones:

- ✔ **Tip 1: Become Deeply Mindful Of The Habit**
Mindfulness involves purposeful awareness of the present moment. To change a habit successfully, it's essential to observe the habit without judgment. Take note of details, such as when the habit occurs, and consider recording these instances to identify patterns and introduce new actions to disrupt the old habit loop.
- ✔ **Tip 2: Replace One Stimulus With Another**
Changing habits can be challenging when we feel like we're missing out on the rewards of the old behaviour. To ease the transition, consider replacing the old stimulus with a new one. For instance, if you're trying to cut down on caffeine, substitute one cup of coffee with a caffeine-free beverage to retain the comforting ritual. By gradually shifting the association, you can make habit change more manageable and reduce withdrawal effects.
- ✔ **Tip 3: Be Specific About The Action You Want To Take**
Instead of vague aspirations, such as getting more sleep, define precise actions. Commit to a specific bedtime, like 10 PM, to avoid making excuses for staying up later. When starting a positive habit like meditation, set a particular time for it, and create a checklist or set an alarm to reinforce the new behaviour. By linking actions to specific cues, you can establish practices that gradually become ingrained habits.
- ✔ **Tip 4: Adjust Your Environment**
Disrupting routines and environments can aid habit change. Move the remote control to another room to reduce mindless TV-watching and place walking shoes next to the door to encourage daily exercise. Modifying contextual cues can lead to conscious choices and facilitate the formation of new habits.
- ✔ **Tip 5: Use Self-Compassion**
When striving for change, self-compassion and kindness are essential. Avoiding self-judgment and shame can improve self-control and promote behavior change. Remember that habit change is a process, and it's okay to be patient with yourself. Use positive self-talk, as you would with a friend, to encourage progress and treat yourself with the same compassion you would offer others.
- ✔ **Tip 6: Let A Professional Help You Assess Your Habits**
Therapy, whether in-office or online, can provide valuable support in making life changes and breaking habits. With the support of a nonjudgmental therapist, you can gain insight into the reasons behind your habits and learn to modify cues for more fulfilling habits. If you're hesitant about in-office sessions, online therapy offers a convenient and effective option.



A habit can solidify in the mind. This may take repetition, but in time, it may get easier.

BetterHelp, "Wondering how to change habits? Here are six tips you may not know", 2023

Stay connected for better health

Humans are social creatures. We need social relationships and communities to grow, to thrive and to stay physically and emotionally healthy.¹ Even the most introverted people need interaction with others from time to time.

Social isolation and loneliness can result in psychological and physical disintegration. Adults who are lonely or socially isolated are at higher risks for²:

- ⬇ High blood pressure
- ⬇ Heart disease
- ⬇ Dementia
- ⬇ Anxiety and depression
- ⬇ Premature death

The key is to connect with people in a healthy way.

Older adults are at a higher risk for isolation. Reasons why include limited mobility, hearing, vision and memory loss.³

Connect with yourself

Knowing yourself is the first step in finding and establishing new social connections. Ask yourself:

- ✔ How much time do you prefer to spend with others?
- ✔ Do you prefer to connect with people in person? Via video chats or on the phone? Are text messages enough for you? Do you like a combo of them all?
- ✔ What kind of interaction feels best to you? Do you prefer casual chitchat? Deeper conversations? Do you just want to be near another person even if you're not talking?
- ✔ Are there people in your life who help you grow? Are there people in your life you think might be holding you back?

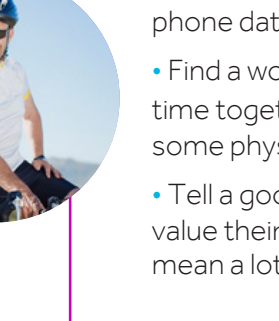
Connect with others

Armed with the knowledge of how you like to socialize, create a plan for yourself. Don't be afraid to speak up. If you find yourself in a social situation that makes you uncomfortable, say so.

Communication is key. Here are some ideas to connect with others:

At work

- Start a lunch group.
- Schedule virtual coffee chats with coworkers online.
- Create a walking group.
- Give praise freely and often! Tell your colleagues what they do that inspires you or makes you grateful.



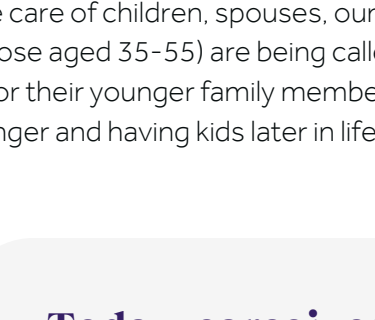
At home

- Eat dinner with your family. Share about your day.
- Plan a family trip.
- Schedule a recurring date night with your partner.
- Have a screen-free night and do something creative together.
- Tell your kids and/or partner why you're proud of them.



With other loved ones

- Schedule a weekly or monthly phone date with a friend.
- Find a workout buddy to enjoy time together while getting some physical activity.
- Tell a good friend why you value their friendship—it can mean a lot!



There's no right or wrong way to find social balance. Be respectful of your comfort levels and those of others. In turn, you may connect with them and find the community and companionship you need.

¹<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-554-x/89-554-x2023001-eng.htm>

²<https://cscnh.ca/en/projects/social-isolation-and-mental-health-for-older-adults/>

³<https://theaagocanada.ca/resources/social-isolation-and-loneliness/>

The sandwich generation: How not to forget yourself

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We are a population of caregivers.

We take care of children, spouses, our homes and our pets. Increasingly, people in the middle of their lives (those aged 35-55) are being called to provide care for their aging parents and relatives while still caring for their younger family members. 55% of Canadians fall into this category, and as people are living longer and having kids later in life, this group is growing.¹

Today, caregivers often get stuck in the middle, helping parents and children. Hence the term "sandwich generation."

What it takes

Any of these jobs could take all your spare time. You're often requested to be in more than one place at the same time. No party in this equation wants their needs relegated to second (or third) place. And there is the emotional toll to consider.

Add in trying to balance your professional demands, and it's extra stressful.

You're tasked with organizing on multiple levels. You're often requested to be in more than one place at the same time. No party in this equation wants their needs relegated to second (or third) place. And there is the emotional toll to consider.



Who takes care of you?

Anyone who has flown on an airplane has heard the instructions: Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others. This one statement is the central tenet of self-care.

Take the time to consider all that you're going through physically and emotionally.

Coming to terms with that requires an emotional investment. Sadly, both jobs only last for a limited time. The reversal of roles with a parent is one part grief, one part gratitude, maybe even one part anger.

Recognizing that you also have needs in this equation starts you on the right path.

Like your younger and older family members, you may also need mental and physical support to get through this time.

Steps to take

Self-care is not selfish. There are ways you can take care of yourself and others by being conscious of your needs.

- ✔ **Be self-aware.**
Understand your own needs—physical and emotional. Prioritize them.
- ✔ **Organize.**
Leverage technology to manage calendars, create appointment reminders and store information.
- ✔ **Set boundaries.**
Don't be available round the clock. Communicate the times you are available and times you need for yourself.
- ✔ **Stay healthy.**
Remember you need sleep, nutrition and exercise. A healthier you is a healthier caregiver.
- ✔ **Communicate.**
Be open about your own limitations. Practice honest conversations with kids and parents.
- ✔ **Practice gratitude.**
Be thankful for the chance to serve as a caregiver. Appreciate the small moments.

The goal is to be the caring, thoughtful family member you know you can be without losing yourself.

¹<https://www.cma.ca/content/191/9/E245>

Indulge yourself, guilt-free

Brownies are an irresistible treat to indulge in, with their rich, chocolaty and decadent texture. These reduced-sugar brownies offer the perfect balance of sweetness and richness while reducing the amount of added sugar. Enjoy these delectable treats without the guilt, and share the joy of a healthier dessert with family and friends!

Reduced-Sugar Brownies

Makes 16 servings | Prep: 20 minutes



Ingredients

- 1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 1/2 cup unsweetened applesauce
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar (or a sugar substitute of your choice)
- 2 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3/4 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1/4 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup dark chocolate chips or chunks (optional)

Preparation

1. Preheat your oven to 350°F. Grease or line an 8x8 inch (20x20 cm) baking pan with parchment paper.
2. In a mixing bowl, whisk together the melted butter, unsweetened applesauce, and granulated sugar until well combined.
3. Beat in the eggs one at a time, and then stir in the vanilla extract.
4. In a separate bowl, whisk together the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, and salt.
5. Gradually add the dry ingredients to the wet ingredients, stirring until just combined. Avoid overmixing.
6. If using, fold in the dark chocolate chips or chunks into the brownie batter.
7. Pour the batter into the prepared baking pan and spread it out evenly.
8. Bake in the preheated oven for 20-25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs. Be careful not to overbake to keep the brownies fudgy.
9. Allow the brownies to cool in the pan for 10-15 minutes before cutting into squares.

Nutrition information per square

Calories: 150 | Total fat: 8 g | Saturated fat: 5 g | Sodium: 75 mg | Cholesterol: 35 mg
Total carbs: 20 g | Fiber: 1 g | Sugars: 11 g | Protein: 2 g | Potassium: 60 mg

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