

Self-experimentation worksheet

Every day, people ([including me](#)) are telling you how to be healthier, happier and more contented.

“Change your diet, keep a journal, get more physical activity, drink less wine/beer, blah blah blah...”

Life is busy and there are **so many** good habits we probably ‘should’ be doing; how do we determine which of those we should invest time and effort in implementing in our own life and which ones we should leave in the crappy magazine we just read?

Some lifestyle changes are so obviously beneficial (e.g. quitting smoking) that you can pretty safely assume that you should do them. You might have trouble actually doing it, but there is little question that doing so would be beneficial.

Other lifestyle changes however are much less clear. For example, will writing a daily ‘to-do list’ make you more productive? Will keeping a gratitude journal improve your life satisfaction?

Often when trying to answer these questions we either instantly dismiss the concept (*“to-do lists suck!”*) or we try it in such a half-hearted way, that it was always destined to fail (*“I tried it one day last week and it didn’t seem to do anything, so I gave up”*).

Sure these approaches might save us time, but they don’t answer the question of whether we’d be better off having implemented the change.

I think one approach to answering these kinds of questions is to get good at **self-experimentation**.

In self-experimentation, we implement a lifestyle change in a robust way, for a designated period of time, and closely track the impacts of that change on some important outcome variable (e.g. mood, self-rated health, life satisfaction). This sounds complex, but it is actually fairly easy. It comes down to planning.

In this self-experimentation worksheet, I am going to provide you a relatively simple framework for testing out new lifestyle changes.

There are two components to the worksheet. They don’t have the most imaginative names.

Part 1: Planning

Part 2: Implementation

*Note: this worksheet is for lifestyle changes that involve **adding** something to your life, not so much for behaviours you want to extinguish or stop doing (another sheet is coming soon for that).*

Let’s get started.....

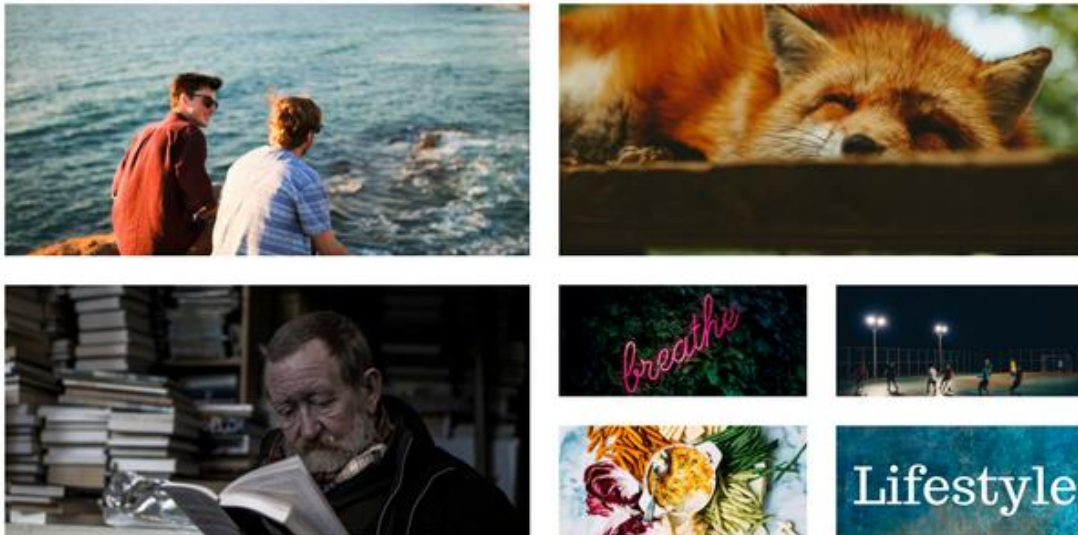


PART 1: PLANNING

In this part of the worksheet, you answer a number of questions to help you determine what lifestyle change you want to make, and how you are going to measure its impact.

What is the lifestyle change you are trying to make? Be sure to describe it precisely, in terms of who, what, where, and when. Also, make sure it is a behaviour you can realistically do. If you are trying to make a big behaviour change (e.g. change your whole diet), break it into achievable chunks and do it in stages.

Example: I want to walk 3 times a week, for at least 20 minutes. I will do it during my lunch break at work, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, by myself, around the lake.



How long are you going to implement the lifestyle change during the experiment? This can be a difficult question to answer. There is no 'magical' number for how long you should try a lifestyle change before making a decision whether to keep it.

I typically observe that people (including myself) do not engage in a lifestyle change long enough before making a decision. This is because many lifestyle changes might make you feel worse before making you feel better. For example exercise often leads to initial soreness and/or tiredness but over time yields more positive benefits.

A lifestyle change done on a daily basis probably requires less time (e.g. a couple of weeks) to test if it is useful versus a behaviour done on a weekly basis, which might require a couple of months.

In the space below, write how long you intend to test the lifestyle change, and why you chose that length of time.

Example: I'll test the walk for at least 4 weeks, cause the first two I will probably be a bit sore.

How are you going to remind yourself to engage in the lifestyle change? One of the barriers to implementing a new behaviour in our lives is simply forgetting. Setting reliable triggers to engage in the behaviour is important in making it happen in the early stages.

In most cases, it can be as simple as setting a reminder on your phone. Other triggers might include scheduling it with a friend, or connecting it with an existing reliable behaviour (e.g. 5 minute meditation after cleaning teeth).

In the space below, explore how you are going to remind yourself to engage in the lifestyle change.

Example: I am going to add the walk to my work diary. That sends reminders to my desktop and phone.



What positive benefits/outcomes are you hoping to get out of this lifestyle change? Identify 1 key area of benefit or outcome change that you think you would get from introducing the new behaviour, that, if it comes true, might convince you to add the behaviour to your life in the medium to long-term.

For many lifestyle changes, we typically want to feel better (mentally or physically) or be more productive (get more stuff done).

*Example: I think I would have more **energy** overall if I managed to walk 3 times a week.*

How are you going to measure this benefit? There are basically two ways of defining and measuring benefit. The first is a categorical change, where the new behaviour leads to a definitive shift from one category to another. An example of this would be a change in employment status, as the result of introducing a new behaviour such as regularly perusing job ads.

The second is a continuous change where your position along a scale changes as a result of introducing a lifestyle change. An example of this would be energy, where on a scale of 0 (no energy) to 10 (lots of energy), introducing a daily walk might increase your average daily rating of energy. Continuous scales are best suited to things like mood, energy, happiness, stress etc.

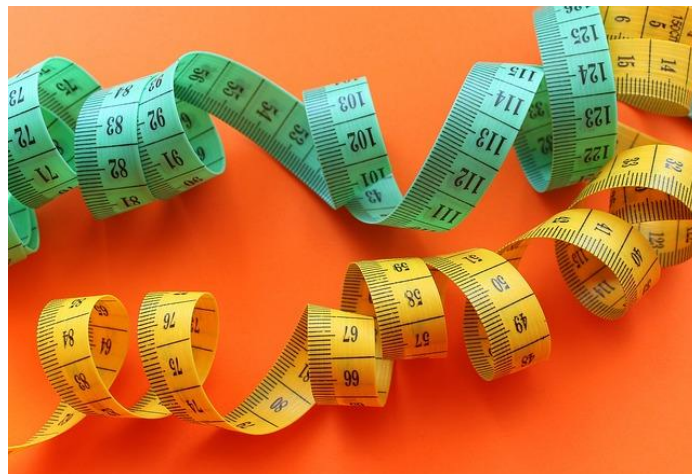
Categorical changes can probably just be assessed at the beginning and the end of your experiment period – e.g. what was my employment status before the experiment and what is my employment status at the end of the experiment period?

Continuous changes need to be measured during the course of the experiment – e.g. a daily rating of energy. You'll have to clarify how often and when you do this measurement. Similar to the lifestyle change itself, you may need to set up reminders to make a daily rating.

Example: I would expect my energy level, measured on a 10-point scale to increase over the course of the experiment. I will measure it daily, at 3.00pm. I will set an alarm on my phone to remind me to do the rating.

A sample scale would look like the following where you circle the most appropriate answer for you:

No energy at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Heaps of energy
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Take a baseline. Taking a 'baseline' means getting a sense of the level or the status of the outcome you want to change before the experiment starts. For example, if you are looking to increase happiness, you need to know your happiness level before you make the change.

Taking a baseline is really only relevant for continuous measures which tend to fluctuate on a daily basis. For example, happiness levels tend to fluctuate, so you would probably want to measure your happiness daily for at least a week, before implementing the behaviour change. Otherwise you won't know whether any changes seen are due to the lifestyle change, or just natural variation.

PART 2: IMPLEMENTATION

In this part of the worksheet, you keep a record of your actual attempt to introduce and measure impact of the selected lifestyle change.

There are two subtly different record forms.

One is for lifestyle changes where you are measuring the outcome using a categorical variable (the simpler of the forms) – **Form A**.

The other is for lifestyle changes where you are measuring the outcome using a continuous variable – **Form B**.

In addition to being a record of the lifestyle change and its impacts, these record forms are also intended to be a statement (primarily to yourself) that you are taking the process of lifestyle change seriously.



Self-Experimentation Record – Form A



Lifestyle change to introduce:

Experiment period length:

Reminder to engage in lifestyle change:

Benefit expected:

Outcome status at beginning of experiment:

Chart – about 3 weeks for a daily behaviour, about 6 months for a weekly behaviour

Date	Behaviour triggered yes/no	Behaviour completed yes/ no	Reflections

Outcome status at end of experiment:

Reflection Questions

Was the experiment a suitable test? If it was, did the lifestyle change lead to the desired positive outcome?

Conclusion

Will you continue with this lifestyle change?

Self-Experimentation Record – Form B



Lifestyle change to introduce: _____

Experiment period length: _____

Reminder to engage in lifestyle change: _____

Benefit expected: _____

Reminder to engage in rating the benefit: _____

How I will rate the benefit (complete the values at the two ends of the scale):

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
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Chart – about 3 weeks for a daily behaviour, about 6 months for a weekly behaviour. Grey shading is baseline period where you just measure the outcome and do not engage in the lifestyle change.

Date	Behaviour trigger yes/no	Behaviour completed yes/ no	Outcome Trigger Yes/no	Outcome rating									
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
				1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

You are looking for a consistent steady improvement in the score over the course of the experiment

Conclusion/ Reflections - was the experiment a suitable test? Assuming it was, did the behaviour lead to the desired positive outcome? Is this a lifestyle change you will keep?

After the experiment

So how did it go? Were you able to follow the process? Did the worksheet make sense?

What were some of the things that helped or hindered your self-experimentation efforts?

Did you find a lifestyle change worth keeping?

Learn more about self-experimentation

This worksheet is a very over-simplified description of the self-experimentation process. There are people who take self-experimentation to remarkable lengths.

A Google search for terms like “quantified self” and “self-experimentation” will net you a large range of resources and examples of how people are tracking aspects of their life, to determine how to maximise their health, wellbeing and productivity.

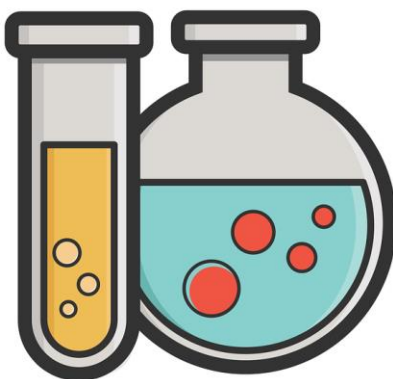
Contact me

Want to learn more about this process?

Didn't find the worksheet helpful and would like to suggest some changes?

Found the worksheet helpful and want to say nice things about me?

Shoot me an email (Gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au) or find me on Twitter [@Dr_Furber](https://twitter.com/Dr_Furber).



Activate your inner scientist!