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Most of us, whether we realise it or not, are trying to get better in some way. This is particularly the case for university students, who are trying to gain the knowledge and skills required to work successfully in an area of their choosing.

Self-improvement can occur naturally, or you can try to accelerate it by really trying to focus in on what it is you are trying to change and how you are going to go about it.

That is the purpose of this handout. It outlines a process for focusing your self-improvement efforts. It uses a variety of prompts to get you thinking about what you are trying to improve, why, and how you are going to go about it.

Let's get started.....

Step 1 – Identify in what aspect of your life you are trying to make a positive change. It could be that you just want to improve in a single area, or perhaps multiple areas at the same time. Use the 'Contexts' prompts (page 4) to help divide your life into areas.

Step 2 - What is it you are hoping to change? Perhaps you want to fix some aspect of your life, or maybe you are doing alright, but want to do better. For example, you might want to be healthier or better at your studies or improve your friendships. Often our self-improvement efforts are attempts to get our psychological needs met. Use the 'Psychological Needs' prompts (page 5) to help you understand these needs and translate this into the changes you want to make.

Step 3 – How is the change you want to make consistent with your values? For example, you might want to change your diet to improve your health because you value freedom and not relying too much on others to look after you. Or perhaps you want to get better at your studies cause you value ongoing learning. Use the ‘Values’ prompts (pages 6-7) to help you identify your values.

Step 4 - What is 1 behaviour/skill/habit you could do/learn/embed in your life to get you closer to what it is you want? It doesn't need to be a massive change. Just something that gets you closer to achieving the outcome you want and living more in accordance with your values. Use the ‘Skills’ prompts (page 8) to identify the types of things you could do.

Step 5 – Having identified something you could do to achieve your desired outcome and/or live more in accordance with your values, how are you going to increase the likelihood of you actually doing the thing you've identified? Try looking at the ‘Building Habits’ prompts (pages 9-11) for common methods that people use to follow through with changing their behaviour.

Step 6 – What is the timeline on this change? When will you make this change? For how long? When will you review your progress?

Step 7 – How will you know if you succeed at making the desired change/ self-improvement? It might be really obvious (e.g. a new job), or it might be subtler (e.g. feeling happier). What criteria will you use to determine success?

Now go away and make the change 😊

Step 8 – With adequate time having passed, did you make the change? If yes, how did it go? If no, why? Is this still an area in which you'd like to improve?

Rinse and repeat



'CONTEXTS' PROMPTS

Even the most average life consists of multiple different aspects. Think about which aspects of your life you are trying to make changes in.

- 1. Family relations.** What sort of brother/sister, son/daughter, uncle/auntie do you want to be? What personal qualities would you like to bring to those relationships? What sort of relationships would you like to build? How would you interact with others if you were the ideal you in these relationships?
- 2. Marriage/ couples/ intimate relations.** What sort of partner would you like to be in an intimate relationship? What personal qualities would you like to develop? What sort of relationship would you like to build? How would you interact with your partner if you were the 'ideal you' in this relationship?
- 3. Parenting.** What sort of parent would you like to be? What sort of qualities would you like to have? What sort of relationships would you like to build with your children? How would you behave if you were the 'ideal you'.
- 4. Friendships/ social life.** What sort of qualities would you like to bring to your friendships? If you could be the best friend possible, how would you behave towards your friends? What sort of friendships would you like to build?
- 5. Career/ employment.** What do you value in your work? What would make it more meaningful? What kind of worker would you like to be? If you were living up to your own ideal standards, what personal qualities would you like to bring to your work? What sort of work relations would you like to build?
- 6. Education/ personal growth and development.** What do you value about learning, education, training, or personal growth? What new skills would you like to learn? What knowledge would you like to gain? What further education appeals to you? What sort of student would you like to be? What personal qualities would you like to apply?
- 7. Recreation/fun/leisure.** What sorts of hobbies, sports, or leisure activities do you enjoy? How do you relax and unwind? How do you have fun? What sorts of activities would you like to do?
- 8. Spirituality.** Whatever spirituality means to you is fine. It may be as simple as communing with nature, or as formal as participation in an organised religious group. What is important to you in this area of life?
- 9. Citizenship/ environment/ community life.** How would you like to contribute to your community or environment, e.g. through volunteering, or recycling, or supporting a group/ charity/ political party? What sort of environments would you like to create at home, and at work? What environments would you like to spend more time in?
- 10. Health/physical well-being.** What are your values related to maintaining your physical well-being? How do you want to look after your health, with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, smoking, alcohol, etc? Why is this important?

Taken from [https://www.actmindfully.com.au/upimages/VALUED Living Questionnaire - adapted.pdf](https://www.actmindfully.com.au/upimages/VALUED_Living_Questionnaire_-_adapted.pdf)

PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS PROMPTS

Many of our attempts at self-improvement reflect a conscious or unconscious attempt to meet our core psychological needs. Even across individuals, cultures, gender and age, there is reasonable consistency in what constitutes our core psychological needs. Understanding these needs may help you identify areas for self-improvement (ps. It might also help you help others as well).

The needs below are expressed as desires or wishes (e.g. I want to....., I need to....., I would like to.....). It isn't expected that all of these needs will resonate with you.

Competence

I want to be good at.....

I want to get better at.....

I want to learn how.....

Autonomy

I want to be able to make choices about.....

I want to be given responsibility to.....

I want to have control over.....

Positive emotion and vitality

I want to feel good

I want to feel healthy

I want to be energised

Engagement

I want to be immersed in.....

I want to feel passionate about.....

I want to be engaged with.....

Relationships/ belonging/ relatedness

I want to be loved

I want to feel like I belong

I want to be appreciated by others

I want to love

I want to help others

I want to feel part of a group or community

I want to feel more connected to others

Meaning/ purpose/ identity

I want to know what to do with my life

I want a reason to wake up in the morning

I want to make a contribution to the world

I want to leave a positive legacy

Achievement

I want to achieve my goals

I want to be recognised for my contributions

Creativity

I want to make a unique contribution to the world

I want to create.....

Safety and predictability

I want to feel safe

I want to feel in control of.....

I want security and order

I want financial security

Self-esteem

I want to feel valued and appreciated

I want to feel like I am a worthy person

VALUES PROMPTS

Values are descriptions of the kind of person we want to be. They are how we wish other people viewed us. The Values Checklist below is not a complete list of values - you can find some comprehensive lists online (simply google 'values list') – however it is a good starting point.

You can read through the list and write a letter next to each value, based on how important it is to you:

V = very important, Q = quite important, and N = not so important.

Of course, some values will be more important in one area of life (e.g. parenting) than in another area (e.g. work) – so this is just to get a general sense of the values that tend to matter to you most.

1. Acceptance/self-acceptance: to be accepting of myself, others, life, etc.
2. Adventure: to be adventurous; to actively explore novel or stimulating experiences
3. Assertiveness: to respectfully stand up for my rights and request what I want
4. Authenticity: to be authentic, genuine, and real; to be true to myself
5. Caring/self-care: to be caring toward myself, others, the environment, etc.
6. Compassion/self-compassion: to act kindly toward myself and others in pain
7. Connection: to engage fully in whatever I'm doing and be fully present with others
8. Contribution and generosity: to contribute, give, help, assist, or share
9. Cooperation: to be cooperative and collaborative with others
10. Courage: to be courageous or brave; to persist in the face of fear, threat, or difficulty
11. Creativity: to be creative or innovative
12. Curiosity: to be curious, open-minded, and interested; to explore and discover
13. Encouragement: to encourage and reward behaviour that I value in myself or others
14. Engagement: to engage fully in what I am doing
15. Fairness and justice: to be fair and just to myself or others
16. Fitness: to maintain or improve or look after my physical and mental health
17. Flexibility: to adjust and adapt readily to changing circumstances
18. Freedom and independence: to choose how I live and help others do likewise
19. Friendliness: to be friendly, companionable, or agreeable toward others
20. Forgiveness/self-forgiveness: to be forgiving toward myself or others
21. Fun and humour: to be fun loving; to seek, create, and engage in fun-filled activities
22. Gratitude: to be grateful for and appreciative of myself, others, and life
23. Honesty: to be honest, truthful, and sincere with myself and others
24. Industry: to be industrious, hardworking, and dedicated
25. Intimacy: to open up, reveal, and share myself, emotionally or physically
26. Kindness: to be kind, considerate, nurturing, or caring toward myself or others
27. Love: to act lovingly or affectionately toward myself or others
28. Mindfulness: to be open to, engaged in and curious about the present moment
29. Order: to be orderly and organized
30. Persistence and commitment: to continue resolutely, despite problems or difficulties.

31. Respect/self-respect: to treat myself and others with care and consideration
32. Responsibility: to be responsible and accountable for my actions
33. Safety and protection: to secure, protect, or ensure my own safety or that of others
34. Sensuality and pleasure: to create or enjoy pleasurable and sensual experiences
35. Sexuality: to explore or express my sexuality
36. Skillfulness: to continually practice and improve my skills and apply myself fully
37. Supportiveness: to be supportive, helpful and available to myself or others
38. Trust: to be trustworthy; to be loyal, faithful, sincere, and reliable
39. Other: 40. Other:

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SKILLS PROMPTS

There are multiple skill areas that I think are relevant to students in terms of increasing their productivity and/or wellbeing. I tend to break them down into the following 14 categories. Yes, that sounds like a lot, but remember how complex the average life is.

Note: these aren't the skills themselves. You may need to do some of your own research to identify specific skills you could learn. For example, in developing advanced study skills, you might have a look at our blog post - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/05/good-student-academic-stuff/>

Habit formation – learn the skills and strategies required to change your behaviour in a lasting and meaningful way

Advanced Study Skills – learn the techniques that successful students use to perform better academically

Mastering emotions – learn strategies to increase the experience of pleasant emotions, and decrease the experience of unpleasant emotions

Caring for your body – learn how to use sleep, diet, physical activity and evidence-based medical interventions to improve your health

Thinking effectively – learn how to think critically, flexibly and create mindsets that make you resilient

Building positive relationships – learn how to make friends and influence people

Helping Others – learn different ways of helping other people

Self-awareness – learn more about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, your personality and the situations in which you thrive/struggle

Cognitive enhancement – learn how to increase your mental performance

Meaning and purpose – learn how to find meaning in your work and purpose in your life

Personal safety – learn how to keep yourself safe

Shaping your environment – learn how to modify your environment to improve your wellbeing and productivity

Work skills – learn the types of skills required in the workforce

Financial control – learn how to manage money better

BUILDING HABITS PROMPTS

Chat with anyone and there is a good chance that they are actively trying to make some change in their life (e.g. get more exercise, eat better, spend more time with family). How successful they are in making that change is (in part) dependent on the strategies they use to make that change.

Health psychologists have spent a lot of time and effort uncovering the many different ways that people make 'behaviour changes'. I've tried to summarise some of the key ones in this section. Incorporating some of these strategies in your quest for self-improvement may increase the likelihood that you'll succeed with the changes you want to make.

1. **Pros and cons.** What are the costs and benefits of implementing this new habit? Write them out and stare at the list for a while. Revisit the list and refine it over time.
2. **Set goals.** These include 'outcome' goals (how you think your life will be better if you implement the habit – e.g. 'I'll be fitter') and 'process' goals (the specific things you will need to achieve along the way to establishing the habit – e.g. 'I need to walk 30 minutes every day'). Be clear with yourself and others what you are hoping to achieve. You can use the S.M.A.R.T process if that helps you define your goals - <https://www.smartsheet.com/blog/essential-guide-writing-smart-goals>
3. **Problem solve barriers.** Take some time to consider all the various things that might go wrong or hold you back from establishing a new habit. Brainstorm solutions to these problems.
4. **Write an action plan.** Describe the habit you are trying to form and how you intend to do it in excruciatingly fine detail. Include your goals and problem solving ideas from strategies 2 and 3.
5. **Where you are now and where you want to be.** Describe clearly the difference between where you are now, and where you want to be in terms of the habit (e.g. I currently do not exercise, but I would like to go for a 30-minute walk, 3 times a week). If the distance between where you are now and where you want to be feels too big, try setting smaller goals.
6. **Make a public commitment.** Tell friends or family about the change(s) you are trying to make and that you will keep them updated on how you go. Social media (e.g. Facebook) can be a good place to make such a public commitment. This doesn't work for everyone and some people end up feeling ashamed or embarrassed if they don't succeed, but others find this quite motivational, as the attention gained from others supports them in the process.
7. **Identify and analyse past successes.** Think back to previous times where you have successfully made changes in your life. What helped? What didn't help? Can you use some of those strategies this time?
8. **Use monitoring and feedback tools.** Use monitoring tools that provide real-time feedback on your progress towards a particular goal. For example, use a Fitbit, smartwatch or mobile phone app to track your physical activity, dietary intake and/or sleep.



9. **Ask for help.** Engage your friends and family to help you make the change. One simple example is to ask a friend to try and make the same changes (e.g. both get more exercise by exercising together).
10. **Educate yourself.** If you are trying to establish a habit that is fairly complex (e.g. learning to play tennis), educate yourself as much as you can about the behaviour. Read books, watch videos, get a coach. Educate yourself about how other people have learned the skill you want to develop. What worked for them?
11. **Dismiss excuses.** Notice when you are using excuses as to why you didn't or can't establish the habit. Treat such excuses with scepticism. They may simply be a way of avoiding making the change.
12. **Observe your emotions.** Take note of how you feel when trying to implement the new habit. These feelings (like the excuses above) might act as triggers to avoid making the change. Thank the feelings for showing up but inform them you still want to make the change.
13. **Emotional self-management.** Sometimes we are derailed from our efforts to be healthy by unpleasant emotions. Develop new strategies for managing unpleasant emotions such as mindfulness meditation - <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>
14. **Increase positive emotions.** Positive emotions help drive us towards new behaviours and habits. Learn how to activate more positive emotions in your life - <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>
15. **Mental rehearsal.** Regularly imagine yourself engaging in the habit as a form of practice. I used this a lot when I was trying to learn how to drive a manual car.
16. **Visualise the future.** Regularly imagine your future self, who has successfully established the new habit. Think about the positive impacts your future self will be enjoying. Imagine how your future self will feel if you don't establish the habit.
17. **Find others.** Find other people who are trying to make the same changes (e.g. through an online forum). Engage with them to get support. Nowadays, with the internet, there is a community for just about everything.
18. **Set up prompts.** Set up automatic cues and prompts that remind you to engage in the habit (e.g. set your alarm on your phone to remind you to take a walk at lunchtime).
19. **Remove barriers.** Remove anything aversive that is getting in the way of you engaging in the habit (e.g. get a warm raincoat for walks in the winter).
20. **Positive associations.** Pair the habit you are trying to establish with something that you enjoy (e.g. listening to music whilst walking).
21. **Have a practice period.** For habits that are complex, acknowledge that the first few weeks/months are a practice period in which you might need to try different things in order for the habit to form.
22. **Use your new habit to knock off another habit.** Try replacing an existing bad habit with the new one that you are trying to create. For example, go for a walk when you would normally have a cigarette.
23. **Generalise your habit.** Once you have successfully got a habit established in one setting, see if you can translate it to another setting. For example, once you've started meditating regularly at home, try also doing it regularly at work.
24. **Reward yourself.** Reward yourself for your progress towards your habit. This includes rewards for building the habit, as well as maintaining it. Regularly visualise the rewards you will give yourself when you achieve your goals.



25. **Get medical support.** Consider what pharmacological or medical supports could be put in place to help you achieve your goals. For example, some people want to go to therapy to work on difficult issues but find their distress is too high. Talk with your GP about the possibility of a trial of an anti-anxiety or anti-depressant drug that might reduce the distress levels to a point where you can consider therapy.
26. **Conserve mental resources.** Establishing new habits requires mental energy. Look at other aspects of your life where you might be able to conserve or increase your overall mental energy. For example, getting more sleep.
27. **Change your environment.** Modify your environment in order to make engaging in the habit easier. For example, leave your walking shoes next to your front door, so you grab them each time you leave the house.
28. **Note the positive impact on others.** When making positive changes in our own lives, we tend to focus on the benefits to us. But the changes we make can positively impact on others as well. Take the time to note how the changes you are making in your own life might benefit others.
29. **Alter your body.** Use assistive aids to help support the change you are trying to make. For example, using braces on vulnerable areas of the body when exercising.
30. **Notice the negative.** Notice when you are putting yourself down in relation to the changes you are trying to make (e.g. 'you'll never get this right'). This kind of negative self-talk is very common and can be ignored.
31. **Attach to your values.** Associate the habit you are trying to build with the bigger picture of the person you are trying to be. For example, eating healthy is part of looking after yourself so you can be there for your family and friends.
32. **Build into your identity.** Start building the habit into how you describe yourself. For example, I am a 'regular meditator'. Start using these descriptors around other people.

If you've read this far, and tried applying the ideas to your own life, then you deserve a gold star....

