



Habit Hacks

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BUILDING NEW HABITS AND ROUTINES

Just about any change you make in your life in order to be more productive, happier or healthier requires establishing new habits or routines.

For example, if you want to get better grades, it means implementing new study strategies. If you want to be happier, it means implementing mentally healthy habits (e.g. meditation). If you want to be physically fit, it requires exercising regularly.

Building new habits and routines can be difficult. Sometimes we get off to a good start, but within a couple of weeks, we've reverted to our old behaviour. The number of times I've started an exercise program but found within a couple of weeks I had stopped are too numerous to count.



One reason we commonly fail to establish new habits is that we don't employ the right strategies in making such changes.

If you are trying to implement new habits or routines in your life, in order to be healthier, the strategies ('hacks') in **this handout** might help you be more successful. These strategies are taken from research conducted by health psychologists (and others) on how people initiate and maintain 'health behaviour change' – that is, start and maintain healthy habits.

There are quite a few of them, so don't feel you need to do them all. However, you might find in this list some ideas that you've not come across before that are the difference between you successfully establishing a new habit and reverting back to your previous behaviour.

Let's get going.....

(Ps – if you like this stuff, I think you will also like the Tiny Habits work by BJ Fogg - <https://www.tinyhabits.com/>)

WHAT ARE HABITS AND ROUTINES?

Let me start by clarifying what I mean by 'habits and routines' because they are two different things.

Habits are very simple behaviours that are done automatically. An example might be brushing your teeth or boiling the kettle for a cup of tea when you first get up. Habits are so ingrained that we do them almost without thinking.

Routines are regularly repeated chains of behaviour that are somewhat automatic but typically require a bit more thought and focus. For example, brushing your teeth and boiling the kettle sit within the broader 'getting ready in the morning' routine, which probably includes a bunch of other activities that require a bit more thought (e.g. choosing what to wear, selecting a breakfast option).

As much as possible, you want to construct each day out of 'healthy' habits and routines; ones that promote good nutrition, regular physical activity, good sleep, connection with others, focused work and rest and rejuvenation time.

This isn't always easy because the modern life is busy and often pushes us towards developing bad habits (e.g. fast food, reduced sleep, less social time). Thus we have to be deliberate and intentional in countering these forces, by getting better at forming new habits and routines.

That is where the strategies/hacks listed below come in. These are the strategies that people who are good at forming new habits and routines use.

For simplicity of language I mostly use the word 'habit' below to cover both habits and routines.

GOALS AND PLANNING

What is the problem you are trying to solve? Most habits are solutions to repeated or chronic problems. Brushing your teeth addresses that mouths get dirty. Going to the gym solves the problem of being sedentary and losing fitness. What problem are you trying to solve?

Have you set clear 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> . If starting out, aim for short-term goal achievement first before moving on to longer-term goals.

Have you clarified your intentions and aspirations? This is another way to look at 'set goals'. It is about asking yourself 'why is building this habit or routine important to me at this point in my life?' 'What am I really trying to achieve with adding this habit/routine to my life?' Clarifying your intentions can help strengthen your commitment.

Have you measured the discrepancy between current behaviour and your goals? Note down how different your goals are to your current behaviour (e.g. I want to use my standing desk for 5 hours per day, but currently I am only doing it for 2 hours). This alerts you to the extent of the difference you need to make. It is also useful to help you track your progress towards a goal.

Have you problem-solved the known barriers to you building this new habit? 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 ahead of time where possible. Perhaps it is an equipment issue or a person (or persons) who are holding you back. Identify, remove or modify anything that is likely to get in the way of you engaging in the habit (e.g. get a warm raincoat for walks in the winter).

Have you written an action plan? Describe the habit/routine you are trying to form and how you intend to do it in excruciatingly fine detail. Include your goals and problem-solving ideas from the strategies above.

Have you made 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.

Have you signed a behavioural contract? Find someone to whom you feel answerable (e.g. a health professional or close family member). Write out and sign a contract outlining your commitment to making the desired changes. Maybe even include some penalties for not making the change (e.g. a cash payment).

Are there any conflicts with your goals? We often have multiple goals running at the same time. A new goal has to compete with existing goals. Spend some time working out if there are any conflicts with existing goals that might make engaging in the new goal more difficult. Conversely, see if there are any ways of attaching new goals to existing ones (e.g. listening to podcasts whilst walking in the morning).

Is the habit you want well matched to the context? It is best to consider and set habit goals when you are in the same frame of mind and context in which you will perform that habit. Deciding on a Monday morning that you will exercise on a Sunday evening will likely lead to failure, because Sunday evening 'you' wouldn't set such a goal. Instead wait till Sunday evening and then consider what a positive habit you might do then would look like.

FEEDBACK AND MONITORING

Have you set yourself up with some 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. You can use feedback and monitoring tools to track both the habit (are you engaging in it?) and the outcomes (are you getting the desired benefits?). It doesn't have to be a complex or sophisticated tool. It might just be a printed-out calendar month that you stick on the wall and put a green tick on the days you performed your desired behaviour.



Have you identified an expert that can give you feedback? Organise to get regular feedback from an expert who can help track your progress. This is most often a health professional of some type. For example, you might get a psychologist to track your mood as you engage in some mentally healthy lifestyle changes.

Can you get feedback from a trusted other? Identify someone in your life who you think could and would be willing to help you track your progress. Open yourself up to the idea of getting feedback from them on how you are doing with establishing your habit.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Have you asked for help from a family member or friend? Engage your friends and family to help you make the change. One simple example is to ask a family member to pick up one of your responsibilities for a while whilst you try to make the change. There are different types of support they could provide:

Emotional support (e.g. a space and listening ear for you to express how you are progressing and feeling)

Tangible support (e.g. financial assistance or help with an aspect of the change you are trying to make)

Informational support (e.g. advice or direction towards relevant resources)

Companionship (e.g. joining with you in making the change)

Have you connected with others trying to make similar changes? 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.

EXPANDING YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Have you educated yourself about the new habit? Learn as much as you can about the habit you are trying to develop. How is the habit performed? How have other people developed this habit? What worked for them? What benefits are common for people establishing this habit? What are the common health, social and environmental consequences of making the change you are wanting to make?

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?

Have you educated yourself about your old behaviour? Try to understand what has stopped you from building this habit earlier. Why were you engaging in your previous unhelpful behaviour? This is particularly useful if you are trying to rid yourself of a bad habit and establish a healthier one (e.g. replacing smoking with brief episodes of meditation).

Have you considered running a short experiment to try out the new behaviour? Set aside a 'test period' in which you are going to engage in the desired habit and observe what happens. What works? What doesn't? What got in the way of you engaging in the habit? What made it easier? Did it work out how you expected? Use the information from these test periods to refine your goals and planning.



COMPARISON WITH OTHERS

Have you found other people engaging in the behaviour you want to create? Look amongst your friends, family, colleagues and peers for others who are engaging in the desired behaviour/habit. Mimic if appropriate. Also, draw on their experience if they are willing to share.

Do you know how many other people are engaging in the behaviour you want to build? Try to find data on how many other people might also be trying to engage in a similar habit. For example, do some research to find out how many engage in regular exercise. This gives you a sense of how socially widespread the behaviour is.



Has anyone congratulated you on your efforts to make change? Take specific note of when you get positive feedback from others about your attempts to make a positive lifestyle change.

POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS

Have you set up prompts to remind you to engage in the habit? 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).

Have you connected the new behaviour to existing habits? Try to connect your new habit to an existing part of your life that occurs automatically. For example, I might listen to educational podcasts whilst driving to work.

Can you pair the new habit with something you already enjoy? Pair the habit you are trying to establish with something that you enjoy (e.g. listening to music whilst walking). You are more likely to engage in the new habit if it is accompanied with something you already enjoy. This is sometimes known as temptation bundling.

Make the new habit as pleasant, convenient and meaningful as possible. It isn't easy to make everything that is healthy enjoyable but see if there are ways to make the thing you are trying to do more attractive.

REPETITION AND SUBSTITUTION

Have you set aside 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. Don't judge yourself too harshly for mistakes or slip-ups. Just use what you learn to build a better change plan.

Can you 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.

Can you use your new habit in different settings? 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 or on the bus home.

Can you start small and build up over time? For difficult or challenging habits, build up slowly. For example, commit to a 10 minute walk each day first before building up to 20 or 30 minutes. Get good at each level before progressing to the next.



COMPARISON OF OUTCOMES

What are the arguments for and against the new behaviour you are trying to build? Research the common arguments for engaging or not engaging in your desired habit. This will help you determine the true value of the change you are trying to make.

What are the personal pros and cons of making this change? What are the costs and benefits to you of implementing this new habit? Write them out and stare at the list for a while. Revisit the list and refine it over time. Use the benefits as motivation. Use the costs as a way of identifying barriers you could address. Maybe doing the list will change your mind about whether the habit is worth pursuing.

Have you thought about what your life will be like if you do (or do not) make the change? Compare what your life will be like if you engage in the habit versus what it will be like if you don't.

Have you thought about where you are now in your life versus 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.



REWARD AND THREAT

Do you reward yourself when you've successfully engaged in behaviour change? Reward yourself for your progress towards your habit. You don't have to wait until the habit is set before rewarding yourself. You can reward successive steps on the way to the habit. For example, reward yourself for daily 10-minute walks on your way to daily 30-minute walks. Regularly visualise the rewards you will give yourself when you achieve your goals. There are many different types of rewards – money, objects, activities, social connection. Pick rewards that genuinely motivate you. Even just a mental 'congratulations' to yourself can be rewarding.

102 TINY HABIT CELEBRATIONS

1. fist pump
2. say "yippee!"
3. clap your hands
4. sing "I am the champion"
5. pat yourself on the back
6. smile and feel satisfied
7. Stamp feet
8. Say "whoohoo!"
9. do a wink and smile
10. smile at yourself in mirror
11. say "yes"
12. say "yes I did it!"
13. say "way to go!"
14. think "that was awesome"
15. say "I rock"
16. do a jig
17. give myself a high-five
18. feel an inner glow
19. adopt a victory posture
20. head nod
21. a thumbs up
22. feel gratitude
23. feel appreciation
24. say "right on!"
25. make a check-mark in air
26. finger snap
27. say "yay!"
28. pat myself on my back
29. hear trumpets in my head
30. say "well done"
31. say "good job"
32. sing "Celebrate good times"
33. both arms up and think victory!
34. Say a chant and clap - This is the way, aha, aha! I like it, aha, aha!
35. shout "Come on!"
36. big smile
37. say "well done"
38. rotate hips & say whoohoo
39. make superhero noises
40. jump up and down
41. do a little shuffle
42. smirk
43. think "that is awesome"
44. victory sign
45. applaud
46. do a victory dance
47. say "bingo"
48. say "yay me!"
49. think "nicely done"
50. think "nailed it!"
51. hear roaring crowds
52. laugh out loud
53. feel happy
54. move your face to be happy
55. fist pump + awesome
56. say "I'm on my way!"
57. click heels together
58. spin around
59. clench fists and say "yes"
60. Kung Fu Kid pose
61. do the Ickey Shuffle
62. do cheers to yourself
63. say "go me"
64. snap your fingers
65. do the hula
66. say "whoop whoop"
67. say "shazam!"
68. head up, look to the sky and make a V with arms
69. rub hands together
70. whistle a song
71. breath out and say "yes"
72. sing "Simply the best"
73. do power poses
74. "got this one" finger snap
75. take a bow
76. throw something in air
77. think of a pleasing moment
78. twist on one foot
79. spin around
80. shout "strike"
81. end zone dance
82. raise both arms - "score!"
83. blow a kiss to yourself
84. wiggle your whole body
85. hum a song
86. jump up and click heels
87. hip thrust + "yes"
88. cartwheels
89. short tap dance
90. hug yourself
91. take a thumbs up selfie
92. sprinkler dance
93. tap fist to heart 3 times
94. hi-five nearest person
95. howl
96. jump from one foot to other
97. do the twist
98. imagine seeing fireworks
99. raise the roof
100. Smile and have a positive thought
101. jump up & down with hands up
102. sing "hey now, you're a rock star"



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Have you considered punishing yourself? Restrict access to pleasant things or actively introduce unpleasant things if you do not progress towards your habit. Punishment is not as effective as rewards, so use sparingly.

Have you tried selectively rewarding or punishing different behaviours? If you are trying to replace a bad habit with a new good habit, consider punishing any performance of the old habit whilst rewarding any progress towards the new habit.

SELF-REGULATION

Do you observe your emotions in relation to change you are trying to make? Take note of how you feel when trying to implement the new habit. These feelings 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.

Have you tried increasing positive emotions when engaging in the habit? Positive emotions help drive us towards new behaviours and habits. Learn how to activate more positive emotions in your life - <https://ggia.berkeley.edu/>

Do you know how to manage difficult emotions? 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/>



Are you conserving enough mental energy to be successful at the change you are trying to make? 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 or reducing your workload.

Do you need 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.

Could using paradoxical instructions help? Encourage yourself to engage in an extreme opposite version of the desired habit as a way to discourage old behaviour slipping back in. For example, if you are trying to reduce your soft drink intake, encourage yourself to drink 2L of soft drink in a single day.

Might your intentions be in conflict with innate drives? We are equipped with a range of evolutionary designed impulses (approach nice things, avoid uncomfortable things, conserve energy) that sometimes get in the way of us making beneficial changes. Have you noticed these sabotaging tendencies showing up? Practise noticing these tendencies and choose counter-responses.

TRIGGERS AND ENVIRONMENT

Have you considered changing your environment in some way? Look at different ways that you could 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.



Could you restructure your social environment? The goal is to surround yourself with people who are going to help you achieve your goal. This might include hanging out with people who are trying to achieve a similar goal.

Can you avoid old triggers? If there are people or situations that are associated with past undesirable behaviour, consider minimising or avoiding altogether those situations.

How about trying a little bit of distraction? When trying to extinguish a bad habit (e.g. smoking), try to distract yourself when feeling the urge to engage in the habit.

It might sound a bit weird but could you 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 for exercising, or getting some orthotics in your shoes to reduce foot pain.

When in the day do you have the most energy? You might find it easier to start new healthy behaviours at times of the day when you have the most energy. This is often why people do many of their healthy habits as part of their morning routine.

CHANGES TO IDENTITY

Note the positive impact your changes are having 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. You might end up being a role model for other people.

Think about how the changes you make are connected to deeper values you hold. 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. Or maybe meditating daily is about learning to manage your emotions better so you can be a better parent.

Build the new habit directly into your identity. Rather than saying 'I'm trying to meditate', instead use language more like 'I am a meditator'. Start describing yourself as the type of person who would regularly engage in the habit you are trying to build.

Is there a way that you could reframe your situation? Try shifting how you frame your new habit to something that is more motivational. For example, instead of lamenting the fact you are cutting sugar out of your diet, focus instead on the additions you will make instead (e.g. extra fruit and vegetables). You will find that there are ways of framing the change that resonate more with you.

Ask yourself how compatible your current behaviour is with your beliefs? If you are having trouble abandoning an old unhelpful behaviour, think about how that behaviour is incompatible with other aspects of your life. For example, if you generally consider yourself a health-conscious person, it would be incompatible to still be smoking.

SELF-BELIEF

Can you 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?

Can you talk to yourself more kindly? Develop more positive ways of talking to yourself. You don't have to go overboard and tell yourself that you are amazing, but you should acknowledge that you are working to make yourself a better person and that with time and effort, you will succeed. Also be kinder to yourself when you experience setbacks as these short-term setbacks are unlikely to negatively impact your overall progress if you treat them as simply part of the process.

Are you falling into the trap of only noticing the negatives in the situation? 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 crowd out seeing the positives in the situation.

Try a little bit of mental rehearsal. Regularly imagine yourself engaging in the habit as a form of imaginal practice. I used this a lot when I was trying to learn how to drive a manual car. Even when I wasn't in the car, I was imagining how to get the clutch and the gear shifts in synch.

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. It is one part of you trying to sabotage the efforts of another part of you.

Use your strengths. What are you good at? Could you use this to help you make the current change? Learn more about your psychological strengths at <https://www.viacharacter.org/>

IMAGINATION AND OBSERVATION

What will your future look like if you successfully make this change? 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.

What will happen to your future self if you don't make the change? Imagine awarding or punishing yourself in the future as an incentive in the present moment to have a go at making the change.

Vicarious consequences. Watch what happens to other people when they don't stick to their intended positive lifestyle changes.

Are there strategies that you have used to help you make changes in your life? Feel free to share them over at the Wellbeing for Academic Success FLO topic, coordinated by the eMental Health Project Officer.

<https://flo.flinders.edu.au/course/view.php?id=63157>

