



Employee NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
January 2023

3 Simple Hacks for Building Healthy Habits

By Michelle McQuaid, Ph.D.

Are you struggling to build healthy habits? Let's face it, despite our best intentions, maintaining our well-being in a busy world can be challenging.

But did you know that studies have found that it's not necessarily more willpower you need to stick with your habits, but three simple hacks that can make your habits a far more joyful experience?

"Habits develop from what you do, rather than from your decisions, or what you think," explained Professor Wendy Wood, author of *Good Habits, Bad Habits*. "They're the way your mind naturally works to code your behavior."

Wendy's research has identified three simple hacks for creating healthy habits.

Shape Your Context

Context refers to everything in the world surrounding you, except yourself. It includes the location you are in, the people you are with, the time of day, and even the actions you perform. So, just as professional chefs set up their kitchens before they start cooking by gathering implements and prepping food to make it easier to cook a meal, you can organize your context to make it easy to want and repeatedly do the same thing. For example, if you want to create a habit of having a healthy lunch break away from your desk each day, ask a buddy to share your lunch hour and prompt you to leave your desk, or go and eat at a place that offers healthy food

rather than fast food. We often don't realize how much our actions are driven by our surroundings and the pressures on us—but our habits do.

Invest In Repetition

Repeating an action increases its accessibility and salience, so that if you're in the same context again, that action quickly comes to mind. So, a habit will only build if you're consistent. It's not enough to do it a few times. In fact, studies suggest that it may take six to nine months to build a habit. This can mean that over time, there's a risk you may find the habit experience less rewarding. So keep habits for the things you really want to structure into your life, and for the things you want to experience and to appreciate each time.

Rev-Up Rewards

Context will smooth the way, and repetition will jump-start the engine, but if you aren't getting even a minor reward for your efforts along the way, you won't get a habit to start operating on its own. To have a role in habit formation, rewards have to be bigger and better than what you would normally experience. Why? In the brain, unexpected rewards spur the release of dopamine, stamping the details of the rewarding experience into memory, and making it more likely that you'll repeat the behavior. This creates a habit that energizes and invigorates you to pursue actions that have positive consequences, and meet your goals. So if you want to exercise more, and you hate going to the gym, you're not going to become a gym rat, unless you add something such as watching TV shows, or videos, or listening to podcasts while you're working out. If it's fun, then it's more likely to become a habit for you.

And if you find your healthy habits still aren't going entirely to plan, Wendy suggests also experimenting with the following:

Continued on the next page.

- **Stacking your habits:** Try introducing a habit by taking advantage of an existing habit to cue the new behavior. For example, if you have medication to take, you might put it next to your toothbrush, or next to your coffee maker so that you get the automatic cue each morning, "I brush my teeth, I take my meds," or "I make my coffee, I take my meds." This can be more successful than relying on recall, memory, and willpower.
- **Swapping your habits:** Take a habit that you already have, and replace it with something similar but more aligned with your goals. For example, if you want to avoid sugary sodas, try buying bottled water instead. The packaging is the same, it's purchased from the same place, and you carry and use it the same way. Because you already have a habit, it can be easy to swap one product for another and improve your health.

How can you apply these simple hacks to a healthy habit you're trying to create?

References:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/functioning-flourishing/201911/3-simple-hacks-building-healthy-habits>

