

GOOD HEALTH TIMES

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2017

'BEST'
year yet

Build New
Habits



Build New HABITS

Have you a new habit
you'd like to build
into your life?

Something to think about

*We make our
habits in life and
then our habits
make us.*

Well imagine as you read this article it is January 2018 (not a misprint!), one year from now. Chances are things will be pretty much the same for you as they are right now today in 2017. Unless that is of course you build some new habits. Which won't be easy by the way because research from University College London shows it takes 66 days on average to build a new habit where now it's easier to keep going with your new habit than to let go of it.

That's 66 days of committing to exercise even when you feel too tired or believe you're too busy or its wet and windy outside. Furthermore many attempts at change tend to fail after an initial 'honeymoon period' of a week or two when you revert to type. Truth is you are a creature of habit and tend to keep thinking, feeling and doing what you have always thought, felt and done.

As a doctor, I meet so many people who know what they should do in terms of their health and wellbeing but they still don't do it, they stay stuck, chained to their existing habits. Common sense is not always common action !

Aristotle the philosopher put it well when he said that: excellence is a habit - not just thinking or feeling excellently, you must act excellently.

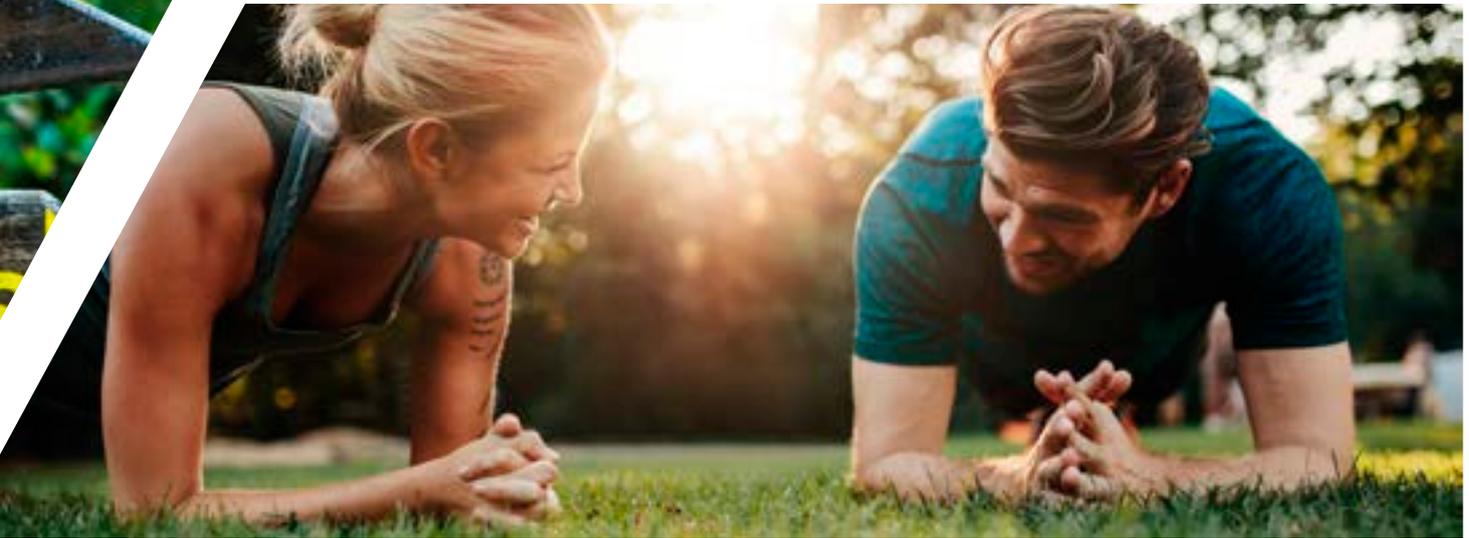
The challenge I believe is to join the dots, to connect how you think and feel with what you do and how you behave. Many habits are effortless decisions; hardwired automatic and ritualised behaviours that shape your health and life overall. While each individual habit you have is not necessarily a gamechanger on its own, over time the meals you order, the exercise you take, what you say to your loved ones and the work habits you cultivate all add up.

Building a new habit in essence is all about building new pathways in your brain and reinforcing those new brain connections, over and over and over again until you rewire your brain; because, cells that wire together fire together. Researchers from Massachusetts Institute of Technology have linked habit formation to a primitive lump of brain tissue near the centre of the skull called the basal ganglia. The job of the basal ganglia is central to recalling patterns and acting on them. This process of turning a habit into a ritual using the basal ganglia is the key to habit formation. When this happens the basal ganglia takes over a series of actions automatically just like brushing your teeth in the morning, so you no longer have to actively make a decision to do it. It's done automatically - the key is that this process saves the brain energy and willpower.

5

Remember the 5Fs of exercise:

- 1 Fitness
- 2 Flexibility
- 3 Feeling great
- 4 Fun
- 5 For a happier YOU!



Building a new habit is not about willpower (essentially willpower is a muscle in the brain that becomes depleted with usage). So the key learning point is that the more habits you are able to automate by turning them into a ritual the more energy you will have to devote to other tasks at work or at home.

Transforming a habit isn't easy or quick or necessarily painless but it is possible. Here are some success strategies.

-Know your why ?

Whats motivating you to build this new habit? As they say if you know your why the how gets easier. Changing a habit starts with you deciding to change.

-Frame positively.

I believe you are far more likely to persist with a habit that you frame positively (becoming healthier, eating more veg, taking more exercise) rather than framing it negatively (watching less TV, eating less junk food, giving up chocolate). Remember if you are running away from something then that means that something is chasing you!

For example if you say to yourself I'm not eating chocolate anymore, part of your brain is focusing on 'not any more' while another part hears the word chocolate. If you're having a good day, and willpower and focus are strong then the 'not anymore' part wins out but if or rather when you're tired or stressed or distracted the brain will gravitate towards chocolate !

The people you spend time with have a big influence on your habits. So if you spend time with people who eat healthily and exercise regularly, chances are you're going to eat healthily and exercise regularly as well. And remember that emotion is highly contagious; every happy friend you have will boost your happiness by 9% while every grumpy friend you have will decrease your happiness by 7%.

Changing a habit isn't easy and consumes a lot of mental energy. Focus on one habit at a time, and once that habit is ritualised then you have the mental energy to work on another. Many people overestimate what they can achieve in one year but underestimate what they can achieve in five! I also believe it's very helpful to design your environment to support your habits . This might be a case of getting to bed earlier or bringing healthy snacks to work with you (walnuts are a terrific mid afternoon snack); maybe you even need to sleep in your gym gear!

Finally it's important to celebrate the small successes along the way. Reward yourself often and remember that small positive changes can lead to big results over time. What's the habit you'd like to build or break starting today in 2017 that can open up new possibilities for you in your life one year from now?

Health Tip

As we enter the New Year instead of saying I'm giving up this or giving up that, simply ask yourself what small thing can I take up to enhance my wellbeing?

'BEST' year yet

This time of year many people are thinking and talking about making changes, big and small, generally shaking things up a little. Maybe you are too?

So in terms of your health and wellbeing why not make this year your

BEST year yet. Here are my 'BEST' tips.

B- Breathing

There is so much stress in today's world. Taking the time to consciously slow down your breathing to four or five deep breaths a minute fills your lungs and body with life - enhancing oxygen, and is a mindful reminder of your presence. Furthermore the breathing centre is quite close to the stress centre in your brain and slowing down your breathing slows down the stress response and helps you to relax.

E- Eating and Exercise.

Eating more healthily, and more mindfully - more whole foods, vegetables and healthy fats while minimising processed foods and sugars. Knowing what you're eating and perhaps even more importantly, why! Exercise is what I call the greatest pill of all because it is simply so good for your physical health, psychological fitness and emotional vitality.

S - Sleep.

Giving yourself the gift of enough restful restorative sleep, is so important to allow you to think, feel and be at your best. Most people need 5 sleep cycles or 7.5 hours a night.

T- Time.

Time for you is so important because self-care is not selfish care. Far from it, the greatest gift you can give to yourself and those people around you is to be good to yourself. Time for others means volunteering some of your time, talents or energy to support others, moving away from 'me' and towards a sense of community and connectedness with others.

Stretching Exercises

Stretching should be an essential part of any exercise programme, as it helps to prevent injury and keep the body loose. Working on your flexibility is also an important part of any rehabilitation programme after an injury. Exercises to strengthen the lower back and stomach muscles, often called core stabilisation exercises, are now recognised as being key to injury prevention. Stretching is also a great way to relax and unwind. The best stretching routine is the one that works best for you. Your doctor or physiotherapist can help you plan a specific programme for your needs.

Support

-We all become our associations

Hang out with more healthy people; find the healthiest people you can and spend as much time with them as possible.

Friends can also be a great motivational support to encourage you to keep going on an exercise program - you become your associations! Strong social support is very helpful for people suffering from depression; a real win-win, taking exercise and boosting friendships.

Spirit-Mind-Body

Spend more time in Nature, what I call green exercise - nurturing that sense of connection

to nature fosters feelings of peacefulness and connectedness that help feed body, mind and spirit.

The growing appreciation of mind-body-spirit interface can be seen by the increasing popularity of more holistic forms of exercise such as yoga, pilates and tai chi, all of which can have significant benefits for your wellbeing.

