

How to Make Changes that Actually Stick

By David J. Singer

If you took a poll, the top three New Year's resolutions tend to be the same year after year: to quit smoking, to lose weight, and to exercise more.

Why do the same three come up every year? Because most people who make New Year's resolutions struggle to keep them. They put them on their list, with the best intentions. They try for a while. And then, they give up until the following New Year.

You know how it works - gym memberships spike at the beginning of each year, and then, those same gym parking lots sit empty a month later.

The good news is that there is a way that works - a way that allows you to make real, lasting change.

Slow Down to Make the Changes – the 21- Day Method

I'm a big fan of remembering that "life is short," and that you have to "stop to smell the roses." At the same time, though, I've also learned that life is long, meaning that we have time, and that you don't have to try to make huge, instant changes - or a million changes all at once - which can leave you so overwhelmed that you make no changes at all. Instead, if you slow down to make the changes, you'll accomplish much more.

The reason it's so hard to make big changes (or a large number of changes) in a short period of time is that we

each have only a certain amount of willpower. But, if you break your big goals into smaller pieces, you will be able to adopt and integrate those small changes in the 21 days it takes to form a habit. When something becomes a habit, the behavior becomes automatic, part of your normal routine. As a result, it no longer requires willpower. And because it no longer requires your willpower, you are freed up to deploy your willpower in the cultivation of another new habit.

This slow and steady approach is extremely effective and adds up to the positive changes we all want. Do the math: If you tackle one habit every 21 days, in three years you'll have formed 52 new habits. That's a huge number of improvements!

Stop to Celebrate the Progress

Most people have a tendency to ruminate about their problems, but don't spend enough time celebrating the good things in their life. It's a known happiness strategy to write down, on a regular basis, three positive things in your life, for example: three things you are grateful for or three recent areas of progress.

This same happiness strategy will also help you to make further progress. In addition to breaking down your goals into a running list of small,



achievable pieces, it's also important that you keep a running list of your achievements. Over a three-year period, and for the rest of your life, instead of just looking ahead at your list of goals, it's critical that you stop to celebrate the progress every day, looking back with pride at all that you've accomplished.

Let's talk about exercise again.

If you are not exercising as much as you would like and are able to adopt a complete exercise routine immediately, that's fantastic. But very few people are able to do this. And those who are, usually find that the change doesn't last.

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Instead, try this. Come up with a much smaller, achievable goal, for example, a small number of minutes of exercise per day. Work on that for 21 days. Then, increase your exercise regimen slightly for each successive 21-day period.

Remember the math we did before and think about this: If you adopt a habit of exercising for only one minute a day (if that sounds crazy, bear with me), and each 21 days you increased it by one minute, in three years you would be exercising for 52 minutes a day. (Now it doesn't sound so crazy, does it?)

Even if you stopped adding extra time when you got to 30 minutes, you would have adopted a wonderful habit, especially for someone who was previously not exercising at all.

You Can Do It

The years always fly by. But if you slow down to make the changes, a year from now you can look back and celebrate a year of important progress. Either you will have made many small changes, or you'll be well on your way to a big change, one small step at a time.

Whether you want to quit smoking, lose weight, exercise more, or make any other positive change in your life, if you make one small change every 21 days, or every month, or every six weeks, you can experience many positive changes this year, and an awesome number in the years ahead.

The years will go by anyway. You might as well make those changes. And you can. We all can.

David J. Singer is the CEO of Singer Nelson Charlmers, an insurance and wellness firm for businesses. He is also the author of Six Simple Rules for a Better Life, available on Amazon. He blogs at www.sixsimplerules.com.

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