



Results
Visit our Facebook page to find the results of the Good Health survey into Kiwi womens' bad habits.

FORMING GOOD HABITS

How do you sustain a healthy habit? Psychologist Gaynor Parkin from Umbrella Health presents the second in our two-part series on forming habits

CHECKING IN, how are the new habits going? In part one of this feature we looked at some tips for setting up new healthy habits. We know that understanding how habits work makes them easier to change. In last month's issue I talked about the cue-routine-reward loop, by which habits stick. The example I gave was of walking past the bakery (cue), feeling like a custard square (routine) and experiencing a sugar high (reward). Hopefully you have had some success with getting started on good habits. If you haven't, or found you started well then slipped up, don't panic, there are more ideas and exercises to get you on track in this feature.

First of all, let's check how you are going with practising your new habits.

1 REVIEWING YOUR NEW HABITS

- 1** Have a look at the list of good habits you wrote down.
- 2** Think about and write down what progress you are making with these new habits:
 - ✓ **Excellent progress:** The new habits are becoming automatic.
 - ✓ **Some progress:** Sometimes the new habits are happening; sometimes there's been a slide back to old ones.
 - ✓ **Lots of slipping up:** It's been hard to action the new habits.
 - ✓ **Didn't get started:** I had a great plan but somehow nothing has changed.
- 3** Well done for any progress you have made! Have another think and note down all the successes and the times you practised the new habits:
 - ✓ What helped you take action with these new habits?
 - ✓ What has helped you keep them going?

- ✓ How did you feel afterwards?
 - ✓ How do you feel now, looking at your progress?
- This information is important as it shows you that you have set up some successful cue-routine-reward patterns.
- 4** Now have a look at the times you noticed slip-ups had occurred:
 - ✓ What was happening when you didn't practise the new habit or slid back into an old habit?
 - ✓ How were you feeling? What were you doing?
 - ✓ See if you can figure out any patterns. Maybe the slip-ups happened when you were tired, busy or low on energy.

Tip
If this exercise is hard for you, tackle it one piece at a time. Alternatively ask someone close to you whom you trust to help you go through it.

2 TAKE NOTE OF YOUR SUCCESSES

Write down all the things that helped you put the new habits into practise; we'll come back to these ideas later. Give yourself some praise and reward yourself for your hard work!

What to do if you've slipped up?

Most important is to be gentle with yourself. It's easy when we slip up to berate ourselves, for example: "I'm so useless/lazy/hopeless" or "I'll never be able to do this."

Unfortunately this criticism will knock your motivation further and make it even harder to get those habits going again.

So, the first step is to acknowledge the progress isn't what you hoped for, then to put your energy into turning it around.

Have a look at the ideas you wrote down from the first exercise. Firstly, what helped you practise the new habits, and second, what got in the way?

Give yourself credit for any effort or changes you were able to make – this is evidence you can make progress towards forming new habits.

3 HOW TO GET BACK ON TRACK

The idea here is to build on any changes you have made and to set yourself up to succeed with a revised plan.

Exercise: revised plan

- ✓ Write down new habits you want to take action on.
- ✓ Work out what the new cues and rewards will be (for example: "I will set the alarm early so I have enough time to get ready, and if I get to work on time every day this week I will reward myself with a manicure.")
- ✓ Plan how you are going to start putting these new habits into action (look back at your successes from the first exercise to help with this).
- ✓ What help or support might you need to get started or to keep you on track?
- ✓ Is this plan setting you up to succeed or to get stuck? If it's the latter, redo your plan – maybe set smaller goals or find another way to break it down.
- ✓ Really bump up the rewards.

Tip:

Remember – it's generally easier to set up a new habit or a positive action instead of trying to stop a bad habit.

This is because we are more likely to succeed if we add something rather than take something away (as this can make us feel deprived and kick back on the new habit).

So try "I want to get more sleep" rather than "I should watch less television at night".

4 USING SMART THINKING – HARNESSING THE POWER OF YOUR MIND

We know that the talking that goes on in our heads can either help or hinder starting new habits and keeping new habits going. Helpful thoughts are the encouraging "you can do this" ones – a bit like having a supportive coach on your shoulder. They cheer you on, help you celebrate your successes, and importantly, help you to bounce back and keep on going when you get stuck.

Optimistic thinking is a style of thinking that is particularly useful when we are trying to make changes. Optimism means remaining hopeful, even when things are hard. Optimism isn't blindly thinking positive – more a case of: "I can do this, no matter what". Positive thinking can be hard to believe. Optimism in action is acknowledging that something might be difficult but looking for a way forward.

Let's look at how using optimism might look in action with forming good habits.

When confronted with a setback an optimistic style helps us view the setback as:

Temporary: "I didn't do very well with this new habit this morning, but I can make some changes and do better this afternoon."

Specific: "This habit is quite hard to change, however I'm making some progress on my other new habits."

External: "Everyone finds forming new habits hard."

By comparison, a pessimistic style would look like this:

Permanent: "I'm not making any progress on this new habit; I'll never be able to get going on good habits."

Global: "If I can't do better on this little habit there's no hope for any of the others. What's the point of even trying?"

Internal: "I'm so lazy/useless at this, how come I'm the only one who can't do it?"

Another thinking style that can get in the way of forming habits is perfectionist thinking, which is holding onto the idea that whatever we do or try should be perfect, and if it's not perfect then it's a failure or there's no point in trying. Perfectionist thinking can be an obstacle when we are trying to make changes.

Making any changing or forming new habits is very much a work in progress and impossible for anyone to do perfectly. Perfectionist thinking can knock motivation, for example: "unless I do it perfectly there's no point in trying", and discourage us when we have small successes, such as: "if it's not perfect then it's a failure".

Alternatives to perfectionist thinking:

- ✓ "I'm doing the best that I can."
- ✓ "Some change/improvement is better than none."
- ✓ "It's OK to have a go."
- ✓ "I can do better next time."

Some final tips to strengthen your new habits:

1 Keep on going. Practising or repeating the new habit as often as you can helps to strengthen the new connections you have made between cue-routine-reward. The more practice, the stronger this connection becomes and the more likely your new habit becomes automatic.

2 Keep an ongoing record of your successes. Note them down in a notebook you like, or open up a new file on your computer. Make a note of every time you

Exercise...

Identifying your thinking habits

Reflect on the first exercise:

- ✓ Write down or make a mental note – what were you thinking when you were practising your new habits, and when you got stuck?
- ✓ Write down which thoughts helped you take action, and which thoughts were not helpful.
- ✓ Have a go at writing down some new optimistic balanced thoughts to replace the demotivating ones. Add them to your reminder card or list in your diary. Read them often.

Tip

If you find this exercise hard, imagine you are giving advice to someone else. Think: "If this was someone I care about and they were saying these unhelpful things to me, what would I say to them?" Then say it to yourself.

Remember, learning to use optimistic thinking does not mean you are trying to think positively all the time. For example:

Negative thought: "I can't do this."

Smart or balanced thought: "This is hard but I'm going to break it down and make one change at a time, and get support to keep me motivated."

practise a new habit. Celebrate each one and see how that feels.

3 Recruit a support team. Talk with colleagues, family, friends, anyone in your support network and see who is happy to be on your forming new habits team. Share your list of new habits you are working on and ask for specific help. Maybe someone can help you with optimistic thinking, or celebrate successes with you. Or someone in your team can encourage you when you are feeling discouraged and help you stay on track with your plan. ☺

