

How to Make Positive Change

BREAK THROUGH

BY LILLY TRYON

Successful change is an inside job.

We are bombarded by health-oriented Web sites, news articles, and television and radio programs; however, instead of inspiring us, sometimes all that information just makes us feel overwhelmed.

We know *what* to do, but we can't bring ourselves to *do* it. The new year offers yet another chance to try to lose weight, stop smoking, exercise, quit drinking, get organized, save money, or spend more time with family. But most of these resolutions never make it to the end of January. What's more, the failed attempt at making positive change generates one more chink in our confidence. We lose hope that we'll ever be able to change.

Why is change so hard?

Take a minute and try this: put down this magazine and simply fold your arms across your chest. Did you fold your arms right over left or left over right? Notice how comfortable and natural the way you automatically folded your arms feels. Now fold your arms in the opposite way. For instance, if your left arm is on top, switch so the right arm is on top. How does it feel? It likely feels uncomfortable and awkward, and you have an urge to fold your arms back to the "normal" way again.

Think about the things you do every day, such as your morning routine or the route you drive to work. These habitual patterns are deeply rutted paths in your brain and allow you to coast through



*So, the New Year's resolution
you made this year is the same
as the one you made last year...*

*... and the year before. If you
feel stuck, try these six ways to
approach change. It may just lead
to the breakthrough you've been
dreaming of.*

the day without giving them much thought. Change, on the other hand, takes energy and effort. It is unfamiliar and often even uncomfortable. And when we do give it a go and begin to make progress, something happens to throw us off track, and we're back doing the familiar thing again.

This resistance to change is actually a timeless problem. The Bible describes the dilemma this way: "Can an African change skin? Can a leopard get rid of its spots? So what are the odds on you doing good, you who are so long-practiced in evil?" (Jeremiah 13:23, Message).

How to really make a change

The truth is, successful lifestyle change is not

about trying harder or even getting lucky. It's not about reading the right book or following a certain diet or exercise plan. It's not just about acquiring information. Rather, successful change is an inside job. It's about creating new ways of thinking about your situation and your life.

Here are six tips on how to approach change:

1. Begin with the end in mind.

You wouldn't head out on your summer vacation without knowing your vacation destination. Likewise, at the start of a wellness journey, it is crucial to define a personal wellness vision so you have a clear picture of where you want to go. Imagine yourself a year from now. What are you doing more? What are you doing less? What is your life like? Word your vision in the present tense, as if you are already experiencing it, and include as many descriptive details as you can. Post visual reminders of why you are making the change on your mirror, fridge, dashboard, or computer screen. You'll find it incredibly helpful to answer the core questions *Where do I want to go?* and *Why is this important to me?*

2. Turn around.

Once you've decided where you want to go and why, take a close look at where you are right now. Are you on the right road to get there? Are you headed in the right direction? If not, turn around. Again, think about your summer vacation. If you want to drive to the beach but find yourself headed to the mountains instead, what do you do? Do you keep driving to the mountains, all the while talking about the fun things you'll do at the beach someday? Do you tell yourself you'll turn around on Monday? Do you scrap the whole vacation and just go home? No, you turn around and get on the right road as soon as possible. But when it comes to lifestyle change, we often use one of those distorted lines of thinking. Drop the excuses, and take responsibility for the change you want to make.

3. Set a SMART goal.

This year, make your New Year's resolution smarter. First, choose the one habit (not 10 or 20 of them) that would really make a difference in helping you reach your destination if you focused your efforts on it. Next, phrase it in terms of a positive

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behavior you want to be doing three months from now, rather than on outcomes you can't control.

Use the SMART acronym as a guideline for writing your resolution. Ask yourself these questions:

- What **specifically** do you want to accomplish?
- How will you **measure** whether you have accomplished it?
- Considering your reality and resources, is it **attainable**?
- Is this healthy habit **relevant**, or meaningful, to you?
- Determine how much **time** you need to accomplish it and give yourself a deadline.

Let's use exercise as an example. Your SMART goal could be: "By the end of March, I will be walking for 30 minutes after dinner five days a week." It is a concrete, doable objective that leads you to your personal wellness vision.

4. Harness the power of momentum.

Place your back firmly against the back of your chair. Now, while keeping your back against your chair and your hands firmly at your side (not on the chair's armrest), try to stand up. As simple as it sounds, it is impossible to do with your back solidly against the chair. However, one slight change can make a big difference: move your back just a little bit forward, away from the back of the chair, and try again to stand up. This time, of course, you can do it. Sometimes all it takes is one small

change or shift—in action, perspective, or attitude—and then you are suddenly moving forward.

What *one* thing can you do *today* to begin forward movement toward your goal? Do that one thing—and let that step inform the next. Don't try to change everything at once. By beginning with small steps and building to bigger steps, you'll build momentum until the goal is reached and new habits are formed. Right now you may only be able to walk to the mailbox and back. Let the satisfaction of that small accomplishment set you up for a bigger and better accomplishment tomorrow, thus increasing the positive momentum. Small steps can make a big difference, because even the small steps define the direction of your momentum.

5. Nourish your spiritual life.

Thousands of years ago Paul wrote in the Bible: "I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions" (Romans 7:18, 19, Message). Paul goes on to offer the solution: the power of God working in us. When we fail to nourish our spiritual life, we limit the power for change that comes from God. Strengthen your spiritual life by setting aside quiet time to read the Bible and to talk to God through prayer or journaling.

6. Stay flexible.

Aviation experts say that a typical flight is slightly off course 70 to 80 percent of the time. The pilot or computer must constantly make minor adjustments until the plane arrives at its destination. Your lifestyle change may require many course corrections and adjustments in both thought and action, not just once, but over and over, until you finally arrive at your destination.


Research on behavior change has identified five stages people go through when making change (see sidebar). These stages remind us that change is not an event, but a complex, dynamic process. Once you identify where you are on the continuum, ask yourself the questions appropriate for that stage. You can focus on the lifestyle coaching questions appropriate for that stage in order to move toward lasting change.

Change you can believe in

Successful change is not just about having a desire to change, setting a New Year's resolution,

The Stages of Change

Stage	Guiding Thought	Characteristic	Goal	Questions to Ask Yourself
Precontemplation	"What problem?"	Not considering change and not expected to start a new behavior within the next six months	See the problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would others say about this area of my life? • What circumstances led to this behavior? • What am I doing to create or maintain this problem? • How has this problem negatively impacted my life? • What will happen if I don't change?
Contemplation	"I'd like to, but . . ."	Thinking about making changes, but not yet committed to taking action	Begin to focus on the solution rather than the problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would I need to let go of in order to change? • Why do I want to change? • What do I really want? What is my vision for health and wellness a year from now? In terms of priorities, what do I want to start on first? • What do I value most in life? How does my vision align with my values? • What strengths do I bring to this change process? • What has worked for me in the past? What have I seen others do that might work for me? • If I had unlimited resources and couldn't fail, what would I try?
Preparation	"I will, soon."	Getting ready (or just starting) to make change	Make a commitment and a plan for change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What am I willing, ready, and able to work on in the next three months? • What might get in the way of my change? How can I overcome those obstacles? • When do I want to start? • With whom can I talk about my plan for change? • What resources do I need? • What's working now in my health and well-being? • What positive steps have I already taken?
Action	"I am."	Actively practicing new, healthy behaviors for at least one month	Integrate support structures and strategies, and deal with lapses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What step will I take this week to move toward my goal? When will I do it? • What systems or structures can I place around myself to help me achieve my goals? • How is my inner dialogue affecting my efforts? How is stress affecting my efforts? • What spiritual practices would support my change efforts? • What am I feeling right now? What do I need right now? How am I meeting my emotional needs? • How can I track progress? • When should I see results? • What can I learn from my slipups? • How will I reward myself when I am successful?
Maintenance	"I still am."	Maintaining the new behavior for six or more months, the new behavior has become a habit.	Maintain commitment and ongoing support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What high-risk situations are coming up? • What will I do when I lapse? • How can I stay connected to my wellness vision? • Who needs my support for making lifestyle changes?

or finding the perfect diet or exercise plan. It is about establishing a personal plan for change. Start with the end in mind, get on the right road, set SMART goals, begin with small steps, and remember to stay flexible and nourish your spiritual life. The road to change isn't easy, but it's wide enough for all of us. 

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