



Guide

GO GET YOUR GOALS

HEALTHY MIND PSYCHOLOGY UK

Welcome

I'm Dr Amber Johnston!

In addition to being the founder and director of Healthy Mind Psychology, I am an accomplished Clinical Psychologist, Neuropsychologist and Pain Psychologist with trauma specialty.



I am passionate about enhancing widely accepted knowledge to better understand components of psychology not often talked about and to break the stigma around individuals who seek guidance to support their mental well-being.

This is your guide to setting habits ... and sticking to them! What you take from this is unique to you - I hope you enjoy the journey!

Amber



What are habits?

Habits are routine behaviours that are repeated regularly and, over time, become embedded in our subconscious minds and performed almost automatically. Some habits are perceived positively, such as exercising regularly or practicing daily mindfulness. Other habits may impact our lives negatively, such as unhealthy eating, poor sleep hygiene, or persistent nail biting.

Common struggles

We often have the best intentions for future behavioural change and assume that willpower alone will be able to carry us through to achieve our goals:

"I'll definitely do that later."

"I'm going to go to the gym every day ... I'll start tomorrow."

"In the morning, I'll have more energy for all these chores."

But how easy is it to actually DO these things? And keep doing them?

If your answer is "not very!" then you certainly wouldn't be alone. That's because our brains often trick us into thinking that it's going to be easier than it is. This overenthusiastic optimism means that we often don't put the necessary measures in place to make things easier for ourselves.

We imagine ourselves being more ready and capable of reaching our goals in the future, and struggle with the reality when the time comes.



How to embed habits

If you really want to create good habits, simply relying on future willpower is unlikely to be enough.

It's time to work with your brain, instead of against it, and here's how ...



01

Realistic Expectations

Whilst it can feel nice to 'dream big' and use our ideal future as a way to motivate and encourage ourselves, setting unrealistic goals and targets will only make your chances of success less likely.

Be kind to yourself, and set realistic expectations for what you want to achieve across a given time-frame - you can always increase these over time.



02

Small Steps

If you're trying to embed an ongoing habit, such as reducing your sugar intake or building more exercise into your routine, then it's going to take time to achieve. Start small and allow yourself to enjoy the quick wins along the way ... little by little and bit by bit is the key here.



03

Rely on Reminders

Our brains are easily distracted by what's happening in our environment. If you are trying to kick a bad habit ... make it easy for yourself and remove the cues around you that relate to that habit. This could include things like unfollowing social media accounts that evoke negative feelings or avoiding buying lots of sugary snacks on your weekly shop.



04

Reward Yourself

Using little rewards, linked to the habit you want to create, can forge a positive association in your brain and body and work well to increase your likelihood of beginning habit formation.

Take care not to rely on this too heavily though - over time the initial 'boost' that a short-term reward provides can fade and become less effective. By focusing on habits that have the potential to yield powerful rewards over time (such as feeling healthier and being able to do more with your body), you can replace the need for a short-term treat with a long-term win.



Speed it up!

If you want to embed a new habit more quickly, strengthen your efforts.

More reminders to activate the habit = the habit will form faster.

Smaller habitual actions = the more easily your brain will activate autopilot.

More rewarding habits = more likely to be practiced in the long-term.

More repetition of the behaviour = faster encoding in the brain.

If any one of these elements is missing, you might need to increase your efforts in other areas. For example, if you know that you want to embed a habit that is going to be less rewarding, you can still achieve this through increasing the amount of reminders and repetitions.

The consistency trap

Often when we use the idea of 'consistency' in the context of the habits we set out for ourselves, we try to apply this idea rigidly.

What we mean is: doing the same thing, to the same standard every single time and to a predetermined frequency.

But is this truly achievable? Realistic? What happens to our habits on tough days?



— What about willpower? —

The early days of embedding a new habit require maximum effort within our brains as our attention, working memory, focus and emotional regulation all pull together to achieve the desired outcome. If you have a day that has been mentally, physically, or emotionally tough, your executive function suffers and so too with that, does your ability manage tricky situations.

In these circumstances, our brains and bodies default to the easiest option which is, in most cases, NOT the new habit that is requiring a degree of willpower to form.

So we miss a day ... and there goes our track record for consistency! Often it can be tempting to throw the baby out with the bathwater at this point, as we beat ourselves up with the disappointment of not sticking to our plan. But maybe there's another way ...



— Having a back-up plan —

If you haven't allowed yourself any leeway, any flexibility or you've set your expectations too high then consistency can be very difficult - even impossible - to achieve. This is why a back-up plan is so important. If consistency is a challenge, it's time to reduce your expectations of what is 'good enough' and allow yourself a second option for those days where you're really 'not feeling it'.

Your goal planner

Goal/Habit	Intention	Back-Up Plan
<p>This could be a goal you want to achieve, a new habit you want to create or a habit you want to eliminate.</p> <p><i>E.g. Practice gratitude through increased mindfulness.</i></p>	<p>In this best case scenario, where your energy levels are high, what do you intend to do to reach this goal/embed this habit?</p> <p><i>E.g. Journal every night before bed.</i></p>	<p>What will you do on those tough days where your mental, physical and emotional resources are low?</p> <p><i>E.g. Think about the best bit of every day before you go to sleep.</i></p>



You are unique

What works for one person isn't going to work for everyone. Our brains are all unique and shaped by our individual genetics, socioeconomic factors and experiences through life. Seeking inspiration and learning from others can be empowering, but don't feel disheartened if you don't reach the same results in the same way. Instead, experiment to find what motivates you, and what is achievable for you.



— Be kind to yourself —

Self-compassion is so important for those who are wanting to make a change and just not being able to do it. Our brains are smart - but designed to keep us alive, not happy! Setting goals and sticking to new habits is so difficult, especially if we're pouring from an empty cup already ... it is completely natural and expected to default back to the autopilot way of doing something through the path of least resistance. Give yourself a break for not being able to change your habits and neuropathways overnight and remember to stick to small steps on your journey - you can do this a little bit at a time.



*To get your
goals*

www.healthymindpsychology.co.uk