

How to establish a habit



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If you want to boost your chances of turning a goal into a habit, behavioral scientist Katy Milkman has some suggestions sourced from her book “How to Change.” These tactics are most useful if you’ve chosen a goal that’s concrete and bite-size.

What’s your goal? Avoid a vague goal and instead set a specific target like “I’ll work out four times a week.”

Make a cue-based plan If your goal is to meditate five days each week, planning when and where you’ll follow through is important (e.g., “I’ll meditate at the office on weekdays during my lunch break”). Write your plan here and add it to your calendar with reminders.

Consider a penalty clause Creating some penalty if you don’t achieve your goal can work wonders. Tell a few people about your goal or place a bet with friends. Jot down your penalty clause.

Make it fun If something feels like a chore, you won’t do it, so look for ways to combine it with something fun (e.g., only watch your favorite TV show at the gym). How will you make your goal fun to pursue?

Allow for emergencies Research shows that by setting tough goals (like a 10 p.m. bedtime) but giving yourself one or two get-out-of-jail-free cards each week, you can get better results than setting either tough or easy goals without wiggle room. How many emergencies will you allow yourself and at what frequency?

Get a little help from your friends If your goal is to run a marathon, you’d be wise to start hanging around friends who’ve made it to the finish line and can show you how it’s done. If you explicitly ask friends how they achieved a goal and try out those tactics yourself, you’ll gain even more ground. Who will you ask for tips?

Editor’s note: *Katy Milkman is the James G. Dinan Professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and author of “How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be.”*