

Habits

At a point in their academic career, many students decide they want better habits including those in time management and studying. Simply setting the goal isn't enough to get there. Building new habits requires intentional efforts and repetition. There are, however, specific steps you can take to support yourself in developing a new habit¹.

Building new habits

As you choose a new habit to build, consider why is this important to you? What are you hoping to accomplish by developing this new behavior?

You can think of the habit building process as containing six steps:

1. **Choose a Cue.** Create a reminder for yourself to engage in a specific behavior.
2. **Reward yourself.** Identify a reward (or a few) that you will receive for engaging in that behavior
3. **Crave the reward.** The reward has to be something you really want
4. **Practice, often!** Repetition is key!
5. **Announce intentions.** Tell someone (or multiple) what you are trying to do. This helps to build in accountability
6. **Ask for support.** This could be about having someone who can help motivate you when you are feeling especially unmotivated to engage the new behavior

An example

Suppose the new habit you want is to build a routine for your days. This is important to you because you want to be better about being in the right place and the right time and planning ahead. You start by creating a schedule but how do you get into the habit of actually following this schedule?

Choose a cue. Your cue could take multiple forms. It could be a paper copy of your scheduling hung up somewhere you will see frequently. It could be multiple reminders on your phone to draw your attention to each block of your schedule.

Reward yourself. Effective time management and established routines can have many rewards. Some examples are:

- More work submitted on time
- Better grades overall

¹ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of a Habit: Why We Do What We Do In Life and Business*. (New York: Random House, 2012).

- Deeper learning of course content
- A sense of accomplishment
- Lower stress levels

Crave the reward. Whatever the rewards you choose are, you have to want them! Think back to what you are hoping to accomplish in building this new habit. Consider what happens when you don't get the reward. For example, if you skipped a study session and therefore didn't turn in an assignment on time that can be disappointing and even distressful.

Practice often! New habits are not something you can choose to do one day and then actively decide against the next. Consistency and repetition are key in taking a behavior and converting them into habits. That said, sometimes things happen. Maybe you forget. Maybe life throws you a curveball and it all goes off the rails for a bit. Note that none of these constitutes a failure or a reason to fully give up on this new habit. In the case of forgetting, you might revisit your cue and come up with a different approach.

Announce intentions. Tell your friends, family, roommate, about your plans to create this new habit. Consider other options that will help to increase your accountability. For example, plan to meet up with someone for your study blocks. If you schedule study groups or check in meetings you are more likely to follow through with your plans. If you go it alone all of the time it is more difficult to keep it up as well and no one will know if you skipped a day.

Request support. Making new habits is hard! Identify someone who can provide you with emotional support and can encourage you on the days you feel especially unmotivated.

If you are still struggling to engage in this new behavior, consider what obstacles are in the way and how you might remove them. Perhaps you struggle with using your study blocks because you are unsure what you need to do and what you need to work on that content. Perhaps you take a few minutes the night before or first thing in the morning to decide what you need to work on. Gather all relevant materials and pack it in a backpack. Place that backpack near the door ready to go and highly visible.

Breaking bad habits

Breaking a bad habit can be just as difficult as creating a new one. It can also follow the same structure as described below. In this case, you are focused on swapping the behavior for a new, better behavior that ultimately provides the same reward. If you keep reverting back to the behavior you want to break, consider placing some obstacles in the way.

Keystone habits

As you explore your habits and reflect on those you would like to change, be sure to consider keystone habits. Keystone habits are those that support other habits and behaviors. Changing a keystone habit can have a ripple effect with widespread impact.

For example, setting and adhering to a regular sleep schedule can help you to feel well rested. This in turn makes it easier for you to wake up in the mornings thereby giving you time for other tasks (or attending that class you often sleep through). Overall you have better energy and better focus allowing you to be more productive. You start submitting your assignments on time and see your grades increase. You feel better, your stress levels decrease as your wellness increases.

What new habit will you build?

The habit I want to make is:	
This is important to me because:	
1. Choose a cue	My cue is:
2. Reward self	My reward is:
3. Crave reward	Do I want this reward?
4. Practice often!	The frequency of this new behavior will be:
5. Announce intentions	The people I will tell are:
6. Ask for support	The people I can ask for support are: