

Six steps to building better habits

By Sarah Bolitho

When we think about changing habits, the temptation is to focus on what we want to stop doing or start doing, not on what we will gain from the change. This puts the negative behaviour at the forefront of our minds, together with the feeling of deprivation or denial that goes with 'giving up'.

Instead, we need to flip the focus onto the benefits of changing our habits and take steps towards the new, positive behaviours. Here are three things you want to be, and three things you want to do, to create successful change:

- **BE FOCUSED.** Decide to focus on just one new habit for a month (focusing on more than one creates overwhelm and pressure and is unlikely to be successful) and make a list of at least 10 benefits you will gain from it. The more benefits you think of, the more you will want to create that habit.
- **BE SPECIFIC.** For example, if you want to eat more vegetables, instead of just saying 'I'm going to eat more vegetables', set an intention of eating one portion [MT1] of green vegetables with a meal at least three (or more) days in the coming week.
- **BE CONSISTENT.** Start to create a pattern. If you want to walk more, then set a time and go for a walk at that time each day. Whether you walk for five minutes or an hour doesn't matter, it's the consistency that builds the habit. If you want to start a meditation habit, then set an alarm for when you can be alone and quiet and practise daily. Not in the mood? Just sit in your space and breathe for a minute – again, it's the consistency that creates the habit.
- **DO TRACK.** Write your new habit down on paper and keep it somewhere visible, then tick off your achievements each day as this creates motivation and a sense of 'I can do this'. Use post-it notes, a planner or a digital tracker – whatever works for you – and remember to reward yourself for your success.
- **DO ENJOY IT.** When we enjoy something, we are more likely to repeat it – so make it fun to do. Arrange your vegetables in a smiley face, listen to a podcast as you walk, exercise with a friend and tell tall tales ... you get the picture.
- **DO SUBSTITUTE.** If you are replacing a negative habit, substitute it with something positive. Change your environment, such as putting fruit where you used to keep the biscuits. Do something different at the trigger time to disassociate with the old habit: take your coffee to go and walk while you sip; meditate instead of scrolling on social media; declutter a drawer when you would normally snack. It doesn't matter what you substitute, as long as it is a positive and distracting behaviour.

With all change, it is more likely to be successful if you start small and create consistency. It can take upwards of 21 days to create a new habit and 60 plus to make it stick, so take it a day at a time and celebrate your progress.