



To Make Big Changes, *Experiment with Small Ones*

It's a common experience for people to set big goals for themselves, especially at the start of a new year, only to abandon them before making much progress. Other priorities get in the way, or discouragement sets in when results don't come fast enough. When that happens, it's usually because people haven't considered what it takes to make lasting change.

Changes to improve your health and wellbeing, your relationships, or your career rarely happen in giant steps. Instead, they're the result of many small steps, taken over time, and the persistence that comes from changing personal habits rather than relying only on willpower.

TAKE SMALL STEPS TO MAKE BIG CHANGES.

Every change begins with a first step, and you're more likely to succeed if you make it a small one. The idea is to experience a tiny bit of progress and feel good about that success—good enough that you're motivated to repeat that small step in a regular way until it becomes a comfortable and satisfying part of your routine. When you take steps that are too big or try to change too much too quickly, you're relying on willpower, which is almost certain to fail you before long.

PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT HAPPENS AS YOU TAKE SMALL STEPS.

Notice how you feel as you try out your new behavior. It might feel a little uncomfortable at first while you're trying something new, but does it get easier for you over time? Notice, too, how you feel over the course of a day or a week. Does a bit of physical activity make you feel more relaxed at the end of the day? Does a change in eating habits make you feel healthier and more energetic?

Pay attention to the results of the changes you're making, recognizing that effects like weight loss, stronger muscles, or improved relationships can be slow to materialize and don't progress in a straight line. Accept the ups and downs of change, and notice whether the trend—over two months or more—is in a positive direction. It can help, as you pay attention to your feelings and the effects of change, to keep a journal or use an app to track your reactions and your progress.

EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT APPROACHES.

There are many ways to make a change, and the first approach you try may not be the right one for you. If your reactions to your first small steps are more negative than positive, try something different:

- » You may have overreached and tried to take too big a step. If that seems to be the problem, you might back off and try the same change but in a smaller way.
- » You might have opted for something you just don't enjoy—a mix of foods you dislike or that leaves you feeling hungry, or a kind of physical activity you find too difficult or simply boring. If that's the problem, try something different.

You haven't failed or given up when you change your approach. You're learning what works for you as you take steps to improve your life.

REPEAT.

Once you've found the first small step that seems to be working for you, keep at it. It's through repetition that a new habit becomes part of your normal pattern of behavior. It takes weeks, sometimes months, for a habit to become so ingrained that you follow it naturally.

Once you've made that first step a part of your life, take another step and repeat that step until it, too, becomes part of your routine. This process of taking small steps, making them part of your life, and advancing comfortably is a more effective way to make lasting change than striving too hard and too fast to reach large goals.

DEALING WITH CHANGE

Often, it is the uncertainty of not knowing that causes the most stress during periods of change. If your life is going through a change, it is important to maintain an open perspective and clear communication channels to ensure you can get the best of out the situation. Below are a few suggestions to help you manage change more effectively, and reduce the stressors that are often associated with change:

- » Do a self-evaluation. Ask what the impact of the change will be on you personally, on your family and friends, and your life as a whole.
- » Manage personal stress. Seek resources such as your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), activities you enjoy, relaxation techniques. Discuss the changes with others whom you are close to and who are important to you.
- » Be proactive.
- » Look for the benefits in the new life ahead of you.
- » Have a positive attitude—change can be good!
- » Be objective and aware of all the consequences.
- » Have one-on-ones with your partner.
- » Ensure your perception of the change is accurate.
- » Know your own strengths, skills, and areas of expertise.
- » Consider counseling through the EAP service.
- » Reflect on all the information before making a decision.