Building a Habit That Lasts

Start smaller than seems worth it. Plan for the week it wobbles.

A new habit usually stalls for ordinary reasons. The plan was too big, it was tied to nothing, or a hard week knocked it over with no way back. This sheet takes one habit past each of those. Work down it in order and tick what you will try. Your own plan and a ten-week tracker are at the end. Take on one habit at a time; when it starts to feel automatic, come back for the next.



Make it small and easy

- [ ] Start with a version so small it feels almost too easy, a minute or two. Sit quietly for one minute, rather than "meditate every day." Simple actions become automatic sooner. Let it grow once it runs on its own. *(Gardner et al., 2012)*
- [ ] Cut the steps between you and starting. Lay out the clothes the night before, or leave the book on your pillow. Put what pulls you away a little further out of reach. *(Hollands et al., 2019)*



Tie it to something you already do

- [ ] Attach it to something that already happens every day: "After I pour my morning coffee, I will stretch for two minutes." *(Keller et al., 2021; Judah et al., 2013)*
- [ ] Keep the place and the moment the same each time. A habit forms when the same situation keeps meeting the same action. *(Lally et al., 2010; Wood and Rünger, 2016)*
- [ ] Make the cue easy to see: shoes by the door, a water bottle on the desk, a note on the mirror.



Plan for the hard days

- [ ] Write an if-then plan for the obstacle you can already see coming: "If I am too tired to walk, then I will stretch for five minutes at home." This is one of the best-tested tools in behaviour change. *(Gollwitzer and Sheeran, 2006; Sheeran et al., 2025)*
- [ ] Decide your bad-day minimum ahead of time. Make it so small you could do it sick, late or swamped.



Notice it and mark it

- [ ] Tick it off on a calendar or the tracker at the end. Writing it down helps you notice patterns. It is not a grade, and if tracking starts to feel like pressure, let it go. *(Harkin et al., 2016)*
- [ ] Notice what feels good right away: the stretch, the quiet, the small "that counts." Where you can, choose a version of the habit you enjoy. Enjoyment now keeps people going better than a payoff later. *(Woolley and Fishbach, 2016; Judah et al., 2018)*
- [ ] Expect weeks to months, not days. In studies that tracked people, habits took about two months on average to feel automatic. Some took far longer, and some much less. The "21 days" figure is a myth. *(Lally et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2024)*

Educational content; not a substitute for therapy. If you are working through something significant, consider connecting with a counsellor or your family doctor.

When you miss a day

- [ ] One missed day does not undo the work. In one study that tracked this, missing a single day made no real difference to how the habit formed. *(Lally et al., 2010)*
- [ ] Come back at the next chance, without making up for it. This is not a streak to protect. What matters is coming back, so a long gap does not settle in. *(Milkman et al., 2021; Silverman and Barasch, 2023)*
- [ ] Talk to yourself the way you would talk to a friend who is learning. People who meet a setback with kindness try again more than people who meet it with criticism. *(Breines and Chen, 2012)*
- [ ] If low mood is making every step heavy, make the step smaller still. If it lingers, it is worth talking over with your doctor or a counsellor.

Who you are becoming

Each time you do it, you add a little evidence about who you are becoming. How people see themselves and what they do tend to grow together, so let the words follow the doing.

- [ ] After a few weeks, put it in your own words: "I am becoming someone who moves every day," rather than "I should exercise more." *(Rise et al., 2010; Hudson et al., 2019)*
- [ ] Keep the line honest. Write "becoming" while it still feels like a stretch; the repetitions do the convincing. *(Kearney and O'Sullivan, 2003)*
- [ ] A missed day does not erase who you are becoming. One day is one day.

Remember why

- [ ] Write down why this habit matters to you, in your own words. Read it when your motivation dips. *(Sheldon and Elliot, 1999)*
- [ ] Tie it to something you care about, not a "should": "I walk so I can keep up with my kids," not "because I am supposed to." A good reason helps most alongside the steps above, not instead of them.

The habit behind your habits

This is the meta habit: one small, regular habit whose job is to look after the others. Its parts, writing things down and reviewing your plan, are well supported. Once it is in place, you are getting better at building habits, not only building one.

- [ ] Set a five-minute check-in once a week, at a set time, tied to something you already do then. *(Michie et al., 2009)*
- [ ] Ask three questions. What held this week? What slipped, and what got in the way? What one thing will I change?
- [ ] Change one thing at a time. Make the habit smaller, move the cue, or rewrite the if-then plan. Then keep going.
- [ ] When a habit feels automatic, use the check-in to choose the next one.

My plan

My one habit, in its smallest version

After I _____, I will _____.

The routine you already do, then the new habit.

If _____, then I will _____.

The obstacle you expect, and your bad-day minimum.

Why this matters to me

I am becoming someone who...

Fill this in after a few weeks, from what you have actually done.

My weekly check-in: when and where

My first ten weeks

Tick each day you did it, even the bad-day minimum. Tick the last box when you have done your weekly check-in. Gaps are information, not failure.

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Weekly check-in
Week 1	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 2	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 3	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 4	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 5	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 6	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 7	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 8	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 9	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Week 10	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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The research behind this sheet

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