

Your change handbook



We're all creatures of habit – but the secret to making change stick is closer than you think. With our illuminating journaling exercises, you'll strengthen the healthy routines that will boost your weight loss

Words: **Ellen Tout** Illustrations: **Kavel Rafferty**

You've enthusiastically embraced a new, healthier lifestyle, you know just what you want to achieve and nothing's going to get in your way... Then, weeks later, you've slipped back into the familiar routine of the meals you were eating before, or that new bike you've invested in is sitting gathering dust in the shed. So why is it so infuriatingly hard to make change stick?

'One of the biggest hurdles when it comes to making changes is the fear of the unknown,' says psychologist and author Dr Linda Papadopoulos. 'It's very easy to get "comfortable" as you are, even if you're currently in discomfort.'

Starting new, healthy lifestyle behaviours – such as cooking meals from scratch, cutting back on alcohol, or going for a brisk walk in the evening – means

a change of routine. Our ingrained response is to resist these changes, because we're hardwired to be wary of anything outside of our comfort zone. 'And whether your fears are conscious or subconscious, they can create barriers in your mind that stop you moving forward,' says Dr Papadopoulos.

So, how can we make a new habit feel more like second nature? 'For some things, you can anchor your new change in something you're already doing, so that it doesn't seem so huge,' says Dr Papadopoulos. 'For example, if you already wake up early to take the kids to school in the car, then you could park up part way and walk the rest.'

The written exercises on these pages will help you to make new routines stick. By thinking about your goals and challenges, and creating unique solutions for you alone, you could open the door to big and lasting changes. And you might also find out more about yourself while you're doing it!



Write your new beginning

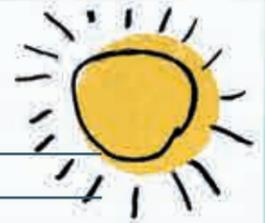
According to research, writing down your goals can make you more likely to achieve them – it creates an imprint of your goal on paper, and in your mind. But how can writing down a few simple words help change your mindset? 'Nobody speaks to you as much as you speak to yourself,' says Dr Papadopoulos. 'You're not born thinking badly of your body or yourself. It's something that you've absorbed and learnt, and that can be changed. What are you saying to yourself at the moment? Are you saying that you've got this? That you deserve it? Or are you telling yourself: "It never works, I can't do it!" What we say to ourselves matters and that's why changing this can help us shift our habits.'

These three revealing questions could help you to retune your inner voice, and by putting your answers on paper, they're always there to come back to whenever you need a reminder. Free writing is all about scribbling down what first pops into your mind, without overthinking it. So, clear your mind and jot down the first things that you think of when reading each of the questions opposite. Be honest and remember it's only for you – no one else need ever read it. If you need more space, for this or any of the following exercises, just carry on writing on a piece of paper or in a notebook.

WHY HAVE YOU COMMITTED TO LOSING WEIGHT?

HOW DO YOU WANT TO FEEL?

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE?



Create an affirmation for change

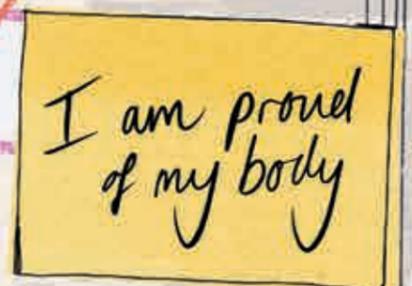
It might sound grand, but an affirmation is simply a word or phrase that you repeat to yourself – a kind of reminder or promise. 'Creating an affirmation and repeating it has been shown to increase how quickly you develop a habit,' says Dr Papadopoulos. To start creating one that works for you, read over your answers above. What do you notice? Does anything stand out? You may have written words such as 'confident', 'healthy' or 'deserving' – how does it feel when you say those words to yourself?

Now, imagine that how you wanted to feel and what you wanted to achieve

in the section above is done. It's no longer just a dream – you've made those changes and you've achieved them. Write a sentence that sums up each of those things, keeping it in the present tense. For example, 'I want to feel more confident' is rewritten as 'I am confident', and 'I want to be healthy' becomes 'I am healthy'. Some other examples could be: 'I feel proud of my body'; 'I am there for myself and my loved ones'; 'I am worthy of good things'; or 'I'm happy in my own skin'. These are all positive affirmations you can use to tell your brain, 'Yes, I can do this!'

MY AFFIRMATION FOR CHANGE:

It's been proven that writing down and repeating an affirmation makes it more likely you'll achieve it. You could write your chosen phrase on a post-it note and stick it somewhere you often look. That might be on your mirror, next to the kettle, in the car or on your desk – you choose. You could also add colours, doodles or even glitter to make it as fun and attention-grabbing as possible. >





You've got the answers

Planning is important when it comes to making new habits last. 'First, take stock of why it hasn't worked in the past. Plan for if things go off track, and expect that they sometimes will,' says Dr Papadopoulos. 'One of the biggest hurdles to change is setting unrealistic goals, or engaging in "all-or-nothing" thinking,' she explains. Once you stop expecting perfection, it's easier to bounce back. 'Your biggest superpower is being able to choose how you perceive things – and seeing things as within your power, with the ups and downs as part of the journey, is key,' she adds.

Use these questions to help you think differently about any changes you want to make:

IF SOMEONE YOU KNOW WAS WANTING TO CHANGE THE SAME THING AS YOU, WHAT ADVICE OR WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT WOULD YOU GIVE TO THEM?



WHAT COULD GET IN THEIR WAY?

HOW COULD THEY OVERCOME THAT?

WHAT COULD IT TEACH THEM?

List your greatest hits

Understanding and eliminating potential barriers is a great strategy, but dwelling on what didn't go well isn't so helpful. The more you focus on the negatives, the more power you give them, and the more you'll start to believe them. Instead, if you focus on what you feel you're doing well, you'll be constantly reminding yourself that you are capable of making changes, and reinforcing that fact in your mind.

Now, put the things that didn't go so well today out of your mind, and make a list of the things that did, however small they seem. Did you decide on your day's Syns in advance and stick to them? Or follow through on your plans to cook a Slimming World fakeaway rather than ordering in a curry? Did you take that 10-minute walk at lunchtime? Or remember to slip some fruit into your bag, so you wouldn't be taken off track by the cake at the soft-play centre? Write it all down here.

Lunchtime walk in the bluebell woods



THINGS THAT WENT WELL TODAY:



Setting aside a little time at the end of each day to do this reminds you of the positive changes you're already making (chances are there are more than you think!), and can also help you develop a success mindset.

'Notice all the small changes, and you'll find the bigger changes will happen naturally,' says Dr Papadopoulos. Appreciating those successes makes it more likely you'll repeat them again in the future. So celebrate every time you catch yourself doing something to move forwards.

The great thing is, these exercises work at any stage of your weight loss journey. So, you can repeat them again and again to take stock of how you're feeling, and to help you to stay on track. Plus, it can be fun to refer back after a while to see how far you've come. Change is a journey – there might be some detours along the way, but if you can embrace it, enjoy it and learn from any twists and turns, then not only will you get there, you'll get there in a way that's unique to you. ●

