



From the Wellness Committee: New Year, New Habits

By Susan M. Gallant

It's the beginning of a new year. *"Beginnings are notation for the symphony of the possible in us. They ask us to break the pattern of our lives and reconfigure it afresh — something that can only be done with great courage and great tenderness, for no territory of life exposes both our power and our vulnerability more brightly than a beginning."* (Maria Popova, *The Marginalian*)

Many of us begin the New Year with the intention to create something new, or to change something that no longer serves us. Unfortunately, those New Year's resolutions have a low success rate. Possibly because we underestimate what it means, and what it takes, to break a pattern and create a new habit.

A habit is a behavior that starts as a choice, and then becomes a non-conscious pattern, and then autopilot takes over. There is no one formula for changing habits. Some habits are more easily influenced, and others are more complex and can be obstinate. However, science provides some guidance that is likely to increase our success rate in following through. (Katy Milkman, *How To Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be*)

Neuroscience teaches us that it is much easier to create new habits than to overcome bad habits. The brain prefers "approach" rather than "avoid." Focus on what you want to create, not what you want to stop doing. The intention is to create new circuitry—neural wiring—in the brain.

1. **Get committed:** Reflect on what makes this new habit important to you. What purpose will it serve? Why are you motivated? How committed to change are you?
2. **Set a specific goal and write it down.** What exactly do you aim to do and how often? For example, "exercise regularly" is too vague. "I'll walk 3 miles five times a week" is more concrete and easier to see your progress.
3. **Create a detailed cue-based plan.** What will cue you to follow-through? Research has shown almost all habitual cues fit into one of five categories: location, time, emotional state, other people, and the immediately preceding action (Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit*). For example, an effective set of cues for establishing a walking habit might be: "Before I go to bed, I'll leave my walking clothes on the chair. In the morning, after I brush my teeth, I'll dress for my walk and be outside by 6:00 a.m. I'll send myself a daily

digital reminder at 6:00 a.m." Different kinds of goals will have different environmental cues. It may take some experimenting to establish the cues that work best for you.

4. **Build in flexibility.** It can be helpful to build in some flexibility. Life happens, so allow for a little variability. Some flexibility is likely to increase follow-through.
5. **Practice.** New habits need to be repeated until they get hard-wired (auto-pilot). It can take time for a new habit to come more naturally than the old one. It also helps to mentally rehearse the new habit. Mental practice activates the same neural pathways in the brain.
6. **Cultivate social support.** Good habits are contagious. We're influenced by the behaviors of those around us. Share your goal with others.

So, as we begin this new year, what possibilities might you be considering? It could be patterns related to habits of the heart, habits of the mind, exercise, relationships, learning something new, or letting go of that afternoon cocktail. Be patient. Practice. And keep in mind how hard it is to change our habits, but how incredibly rewarding it is when we do!