



“Instigating new rituals becomes a lot easier once you’re clear about why you’re doing it in the first place”

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, but when it comes to forming new habits, it’s a potholed dirt track of broken unicorns, shattered starbursts and toxic fairy dust. If you’re reading this having joined a gym and been just once, tried to stop smoking but are still having “the occasional” cigarette, or resolved to read more books, then beat a hasty retreat to the comfort of a box set, embarking on some life changes can feel like a setup for failure. And that’s because it often is – studies show that seven out of 10 of us who join gyms in January will no longer be going by May.

Dr Sabine Donnai, the founder of Viavi, a clinic specialising in preventative diagnostic wellbeing, knows all too well the pitfalls of making resolutions. She assesses the physiology of her high-achieving clientele in a series of medical tests and consultations, and then encourages them to make the necessary improvements to ward off serious illness in later life. “It can be frustrating,” Donnai says. “You see people once or twice a year, and they’re full of impetus to change, but somehow life takes over and that impetus isn’t quite enough.” Giving her clients solid statistical evidence is helpful – but has its limits. “The pushback we get is to do with time,” she explains. “That said, if your best friend were in need, you’d instantly make time for them. So why aren’t you treating yourself like you’re your own best friend?”

Instigating new rituals becomes a lot easier once you’re clear about why you’re doing it in the first place. Habit coach Dr Heather McKee believes we should look at each resolution like a recipe. You can’t make a successful dish if you only have the ingredients – you need the method, too. “Imagine you want to run a marathon for reasons of performance, or for Instagram likes, or whatever it is. In psychology, this is known as an extrinsic goal. The problem is that these goals are sustainable only up to a point – they might get you started on your training, but they won’t keep you engaged.” What will, however, is an intrinsic goal – that

is, a deeper reason based on personal significance – which McKee helps her clients discover. “Someone will say they want to lose weight because they want to be thinner. And I’ll ask, ‘Why?’ And they’ll reply that they want to be the best they can be, and I’ll ask, ‘Why?’ And we’ll go on like this until we uncover the core issue, which is a desire to be happier.” Pinpointing this meaningful motive can be the difference between succeeding and losing interest in a new habit.

With a higher purpose in place, it’s time to make your goal appealing and achievable. “Strip it back, make it laughably easy,” McKee says. Habits such as brushing your teeth – which you do automatically – are “formed through context-dependent repetition, doing the same thing over and over again.” For this, organisation is key. “Always plan and schedule what you’re going to do. Imagine where and how it’s going to take place, book it in and make sure it’s something you enjoy doing.”

Of course, this is easier with some types of habit than others. Donnai is a huge advocate of meditation, although she understands it can be daunting. “The time spent seemingly doing nothing is hard to sell to an alpha personality who rarely sits still.” Donnai suggests fitting meditation into existing routines – for example, during a morning commute. As the results become self-evident, it’s easier to keep going. She cites one client who, after months of depression, saw immediate results from meditating. Her question to Donnai was, “Why am I only starting this now?”

Perhaps, most importantly, we need to be kind to ourselves. While that may sound like wimpy liberalism to those obsessive, driven types who actually stick to whatever they set out to do (I’m not at all jealous, by the way), personal care is a powerful motivation. Ole Henriksen, the 68-year-old skincare expert, who founded his eponymous brand on the same positive-minded principles that guide his life, gives me this simple advice: “Everything in life requires discipline and commitment, but it always comes back to self-love.” See you at the gym. ■