10 Questions To Finally Change Your Habits

Stop fantasizing about how you're going to change. Ask yourself these questions, and make it happen–whatever your goals are.

There are a ton of people who read self-improvement blogs and books, but never put them into action.

They engage in what's sometimes called "self-improvement porn".

I've done this myself in the past–it was a form of fantasizing about how I was going to make my life better, get my shit together.

But I didn't take action because:

I was too busy right that moment, so I'd bookmark the article for later. Later never comes.
I didn't have time for a new big project, and this change seemed too big.
I didn't really believe I could do it, because whoever was writing was probably more disciplined than I was.
I was looking for inspiration, but didn't have the energy to actually implement.
I planned to do it but never actually made the time.

Amazingly, I overcame all of that. I actually started changing my life (back in 2005), one habit at a time. I started the ball rolling, and found success, and kept going after that. I'm still changing habits today, a little step at a time, but looking back on all the changes I've made … my life is unrecognizable from when I started.

I figured out how to go from reading about changes, to actually taking action.

What works to create action? Asking myself these questions:

1. Is there a small action I can take right now?

Maybe I can put something on the calendar, email a friend for accountability, write a blog post about it, start writing out an action plan. If there isn't a small action I can do right now, I might mark it on an Idea List, but in truth it probably won't be implemented.

2. Am I willing to commit to this for a month?

Maybe I have too much going on in my life, so there's really no room for a new habit or life change. Again, I can add it to the Idea List, but if I'm not willing to commit for a month (not necessarily now, but in the near future), then this isn't important enough to me.

3. If I do this every day, what change will result?

If I write every day, perhaps it will build my career and help people. If I exercise, I'll get healthier and in better shape. If I eat healthy, I'll get healthier. If I meditate, I'll be more mindful during the day. Small actions add up to larger results.

4. Does this have major meaning in my life?

Sometimes the larger results (health, mindfulness, career, helping people) are meaningful. Other times maybe not as much, for my life at least. A new change has to pass this test. I'll often also ask: "Would the change be more meaningful than the things I'm already doing?" If not, I stick to what I'm doing of course.

5. Does the pain of not doing it outweigh the fear of doing it?

Usually we don't take action because we're afraid: that we'll fail, that we won't

be good enough, that we'll embarrass ourselves. This fear is actual pain, and so we avoid it. But not taking action also can result in pain–letting myself get unhealthier by eating junk food, for example, might make me feel much worse (physically and mentally) than the healthy eating changes I'm afraid of. Often we don't take action until the answer to this question is clearly yes.

6. Can I make this a two- or five-minute action?

Honestly, I don't have time in my life for something that will take an hour or three each day. I already have a lot in my life. But if I can boil the change down to a small action (at least to start with), then I can find the energy, motivation and time to get started. Once it becomes a habit, I can expand on it if I really like it. An example: I started running just five minutes a day, and slowly increased it until I ran a marathon at the end of a year of running.

7. When will I carve out time?

This is a really key question–it's not enough to say, "I'm going to meditate for two minutes a day starting tomorrow!" You have to say when exactly that will happen. The exact time of day isn't important (6:07 a.m.), but when in your daily routine ("immediately upon waking" or "right after I shower" for example). You have to commit to this time, carve it out, make it happen.

8. How can I hold myself accountable?

This is another huge factor–if I don't create accountability, I'm probably not committed and it probably won't last long. Accountability creates the environment for your habit to succeed. Some examples of accountability: commit to a friend, post weekly updates on Facebook or Twitter, blog about it, join a challenge with your family or co-workers, join an accountability team in the Sea Change Program.

9. Can I give myself early small successes?

This helps overcome the "I don't believe I can do it" problem, along with

starting with just two or five minutes (which makes it so easy you know you can do it). If you give yourself small successes, you'll feel motivated to continue. If you fail a lot (which happens when people start with 20 or 30 minutes), you'll get de-motivated. Small successes: reporting to your friend that you did five minutes today, checking off your morning run on a social running app, posting your writing to a blog that other people will see.

10. How will I make sure not to forget?

Another key: most people say they'll do a new habit and then forget most days. Because they haven't fully committed themselves, or they haven't found a way to remember. Some possibilities: send yourself a daily reminder, have an alarm or calendar event set up, put a huge note somewhere you won't forget, put a sticky note on your laptop, have your spouse or roommate remind you each morning, put your running shoes or meditation cushion in your bedroom door so you won't miss it.

If I can run through all of these questions, I'll actually take action on a new change that I've read about. And it will very likely be a success.

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