

Five tips for establishing healthy habits that last

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Credit: Florida International University

When it comes to developing better habits – in the classroom, the workplace or in life – you probably already know what habits you want to build.

You want to eat healthier, exercise regularly, get more sleep at night, stop procrastinating on projects.

The problem is how to establish those habits – and make them part of your everyday routine.

"Habits are behaviors that through continuous repetition become automatic," says Mariela Gabaroni, associate director of health promotion for FIU's Healthy Living Program. "Good habits can take us to good places."

At a workshop in early March for faculty and staff ready to participate in the Panther Active Wellness Services (PAWS) to Move Challenge, a six-week competition encouraging university community members to track the amount of time they exercise, Gabaroni provided some insight into how habits – good or bad – play a significant role in our lives.

According to Gabaroni, exchanging [bad habits](#) for good ones requires a commitment to change, the right motivation and being specific about what it is you want to change.

Here are some tips for building habits that will last:

Identify patterns of behavior

The first step to changing your behaviors is to identify your current behavioral patterns. One way to do that is to track and monitor your behaviors in order to gain a clear understanding of what the problems are and where you to start.

"If you want to exercise more and don't think you have enough time, keep a time log and see how you spend time throughout the day," Gabaroni says. "See how much time are you spending on social media

and online. You will be surprised how much time you can get back here and there."

Set specific goals

It's great that you want to exercise regularly and exchange those Snickers bars for mixed fruit bowls. But if you don't attach goals to the habits, after a while you might lose motivation to keep going.

Great goals are S.M.A.R.T. goals: they are specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic and time-based.

Attach your habits to your motivations through your goals. Why do you want to eat healthier and exercise regularly? Is it to lose some weight? If so, how much weight? And by when do you want to lose that weight?

An example of a S.M.A.R.T. [goal](#) might be losing five pounds over the next 30 days or walking 30 minutes each day after work or class.

Create a strategy

Once you lock in on a [habit](#) you want to change or establish, it's important to have a plan of action and to utilize the resources available to you – especially at FIU.

"There are all kinds of free classes and resources available, both here at the university and in the county," Gabaroni said. "Look for all the resources that are available and use them."

If you want to develop a running habit, maybe join the FIU Run Club for their Tuesday night runs. Or if yoga or Zumba is your thing, look for a PantherFIT group fitness class that appeals to you. If you're trying to eat

healthier, plan out your meals ahead of time and bring your own lunch and snacks to work or class.

No matter what your goals or habits are, having a plan goes a long way. As the old adage goes – if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

Build a team

The PAWS To Move Challenge encourages faculty and staff members to come together and form teams, and for good reason.

No matter what kind of habits you want to develop, having a small team of people (or even just one other person) around you to help motivate, support and encourage you can help you stick with it when the going gets tough. They can also hold you accountable when you feel like skipping that workout or ordering a Whopper from the Burger King in the Graham Center.

When it comes to changing habits, community is critical.

Remember why you started

Changing our behaviors and establishing habits is hard work that takes time. Most experts believe it takes at least 66 days – about two months – before a new habit takes hold and there will be days in between that will make you want to quit.

In those moments, it's important to remember why you started and wanted to build that habit in the first place. Staying connected to your motivations is key to establishing a habit and, according to Gabaroni, it helps to write it down.

She recommends crafting a document – a personal contract – stating the habit you want to develop, the goals you are setting, how you're going to reach those goals and what's driving you to build this habit. Then sign it and keep it somewhere visible where you can see it.

"It helps you sustain your motivation and keeps you engaged in the process," Gabaroni said.

Provided by Florida International University

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