

Q and A: Simplify health goals for success

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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I am a mom of three kids under 10, and I have struggled with weight loss for years. I am challenged between family and work obligations to maintain a healthy lifestyle. I always start off strong, but then I get overwhelmed and stop. Last month, despite trying to eat right and working out daily, I gained weight after two weeks instead of

losing it. And then if I miss several days at the gym, I start wondering what's the point. I feel as if I am in a constant battle with myself to live better. Do you have any advice for helping to stay motivated?

ANSWER: Life can be busy, as you juggle kids, work and family, along with many other obligations. Understandably, this hectic pace can make it difficult to cook a healthy meal or find time to work out and take care of yourself. The side effects of this behavior often can be an increase in body weight or a standstill when it comes to losing pounds.

Adding insult to injury, yo-yo weight losses and gains can cause such issues as prediabetes with borderline cholesterol levels or prehypertensive blood pressure. Justifiably, this can cause higher levels of stress, guilt and depression, and lead to negative behavior like comfort eating and additional weight gain.

When I talk to patients, I find that people often come up with a plan to lose the weight that includes things such as:

- Ridding homes of any desserts, candy, soda and processed food.
- Promising to buy and eat only whole foods made from scratch.
- Going to the gym five or more days a week and working out for an hour each time.
- Hiring a life coach to help get their life together.
- Reducing work stress.

Does this sound familiar?

Most people start out strong and do OK for three to four weeks, but then they slowly revert to old habits that leave them with excess pounds and feeling discouraged. Once they get motivated to try again, they do, but the cycle tends to repeat itself.

I recommend simplifying your goals. Adjust your outlook of better health to break the vicious cycle of exercise and diet plans that aren't sustainable. Start with a few small things that are realistic given your lifestyle, work and family needs.

Rather than identify six or seven goals, select and focus on one simple thing you can change today. For instance, identify a single thing related to your diet, such as cutting out [sugary drinks](#) and increasing your water intake. If you are someone who drinks multiple sodas daily, you can lose upward of 10 pounds a year by reducing your intake by one soda per day, even if you change nothing else. This is a perfect example of creating success for yourself by just changing one thing.

Another idea would be to eat a salad every other day with a meal. This can be something you can easily manage and feel successful with. Just remember not to overload it with dressing. Or instead of grabbing a handful of chips for a snack, grab an apple or a cheese stick. Consider the same substitutions for your children so you won't be tempted.

Over time, one change will lead to another. As you implement healthy things into your routine, you will build more success. And that success will make these lifestyle changes sustainable.

With respect to physical activity, take a moment to focus on the amount of physical activity per week you want to aim for rather than a number of days at the gym. Ideally, we know that for optimal cardiac health and [weight loss](#), the recommended amount of moderate [physical activity](#) is about 175 minutes a week. Although that translates to about five sessions of 30 minutes of aerobic exercise, start smaller.

If you give yourself some grace to find something that works, you can then build on it until it's more sustainable.

As a working mom of young kids, getting to the gym daily may be challenging. Can you find two 15-minute slots in your day to go for a walk outside? Can you and your family—kids included—go for a walk after dinner? Over time, increase your behaviors. Commit to a 30-minute walk or visit the gym once or twice a week for 30 minutes. Recent studies show that even one visit to the gym, although not optimal, is still better than not going at all. In addition, you can feel good knowing you have had success.

Over time, you can gradually move your goal to three times a week. Then eventually you can increase the time to 45 minutes or one hour.

Remember, building healthy habits takes time. Think about your children. When children are learning a skill, whether it's reading, writing their name or riding a bike, they experience setbacks and successes. Those successes are usually celebrated. These experiences build momentum and provide confidence that leads to long-term sustainability.

Motivation by success works much better than motivation by guilt. Unfortunately, a lot of motivation to change is guilt-based. This doesn't work with motivating children, or with managers and leaders with employees in the workplace, so why should you expect this to work for yourself?

Take time to identify some easy, simple, healthy adjustments you can make that will give you the confidence to keep adding new things. Also, talk with your [health care provider](#) if you have special dietary needs, any underlying medical conditions or have more specific questions.

—Dr. Graham King, Family Medicine, Mayo Clinic Health System, Mankato, Minnesota

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