Describe the Progress You’ve Made

Video Transcript

Annie: I set a lot of goals throughout this course, and it was a really good learning experience for me. I set goals like making sure I was exercising a certain number of days a week, making sure I was eating a certain amount of vegetables a day, and I learned a lot about setting goals for myself, and I'm continuing to do that even now that the course is over.

Josh: Getting my fruits and vegetables in daily is a challenge, so I'm still working on that one. But sleep-wise, I definitely feel that I am getting a lot more healthy amount of sleep every night.

Sigin: I'm not very good at eating breakfast in the morning, just because I love sleep, but it actually really, really helps. I always feel more focused in my classes when I eat breakfast, and I have way more energy, and I'm not like starving by the middle of the day. So that's one of the goals that I've been working on, and it's slowly getting there.

Ashley: At times good and at times not so good, but for the most part, I mean, after a while, when you see results, even if it's just a little bit, it's a good motivation to keep me going and keep on trying to meet the goals.

Melissa: It's still kind of a challenge, but it's definitely becoming part of my routine. It's tough, especially now, in April, with finals coming up, but I'm trying. It's a conscious effort.

Liz: Sometimes I struggle with it just because it's still new to me. I mean, I took the course last semester, so I'm still adapting to the lifestyle. I've lived this way for 21 years. It's going to be a challenge, but it's becoming more of a lifestyle for me because I've seen the positive changes that this course has helped me make.

Throughout these lessons, we’ve presented ways to manage time and address procrastination, be physically active and avoid a sedentary lifestyle, get adequate and good quality sleep, and eat a healthy, well-balanced diet, in addition to exploring what it means to have a healthy relationship with food and our bodies. We’ve discussed the change process, and perhaps you’ve progressed along the stages of change and set some personal goals. While we shared tips for effective goal-setting, we recognize that sometimes things can get in the way. This final lesson focuses on how to make changes stick and prevent relapse into old, less healthy habits.
After going through this lesson, you will be able to:

- Recognize triggers and risk factors that increase the likelihood of setbacks; and
- Identify strategies for anticipating triggers, managing risk factors, learning from setbacks, and maintaining optimism about your ability to make the changes you want in your life.

The best changes are ones you can maintain in the long run.

It’s important to remember, though, that sometimes it’s just not possible to avoid the occasional setback, also referred to as a slip or lapse. Examples may include:

- missing your planned resistance training routine or daily walk;
- staying up later than intended; or
- skipping breakfast because you were running late for class.

At times there may be a specific reason for a setback, such as a change in your routine or something upsetting or stressful making you feel overwhelmed.
Alternately, sometimes our motivation may just run low for no obvious reason. Slips are normal—even expected—and OK.

There are two potential outcomes of a lapse: relapse or prolapse. **Relapse** is returning to old behavior following an initial setback. **Prolapse** is getting back on track in the direction of positive change.

A favorite saying comes to mind here: we often can’t control what happens in life, but we can control how we respond. If you experience a setback, forgive yourself, let it go, and then set your mind to getting back on track. The following pages offer some tips for doing just that.

**Both internal and external factors can reduce one’s motivation for positive change.**

**Internal risk factors** are aspects of your physical or mental condition that reduce your motivation or interrupt your plans. An example is feeling tired from sleeping less than usual; this in turn could lead to not having the energy to complete a workout plan or overeating to compensate for lack of energy.

**External risk factors** are ongoing situations that can lead to increased stress and therefore hinder motivation or action toward change. Examples could include ongoing family circumstances, a strained friendship, or a poor living environment.

**Triggers are more immediate events that contribute to a setback.** Some triggers are practical problems or barriers, for example falling out of your usual exercise routine because family is visiting from out of town.

Others are more internal and affected by our physical or mental state. An example of this might be feeling self-conscious about following a healthy lifestyle if family is visiting and those family members don’t understand your new behavior and support you in making healthier food choices or taking time to be active.

**All-or-Nothing Thinking**
Most slips or lapses start small but sometimes snowball from there—possibly to a point of feeling like you’re stuck in a rut or tempted to give up completely. Your mental reaction to that initial small slip is at the center of such a snowball effect. For example, you may be feeling down about a food choice. You start to think, “the whole day is shot,” and pretty soon, “the whole weekend is shot.” Instead,
what if you accepted the food choice as OK? After all, all foods fit in moderation—right? Forgive yourself, let it go, and move on. You can’t control or change what’s happened in the past, but you can choose how to go forward.

**Guilt & Self-Blame**
There may be times when feeling a bit guilty is an effective motivator for positive change, but by and large, guilt and self-blame are usually de-motivating. Unfortunately, many of us don’t stop at a little bit guilty. When we slip up, we fall into feeling guilty and blaming ourselves. We often get pretty global with the guilt and self-blame: “I’m always screwing up” and “I’ll never be able to stick to anything.” This guilt makes getting back on track less likely. Feeling hopeless reinforces that all-or-nothing thinking.

Be aware of words like always and never. Ask yourself: Does guilt and self-blame help me achieve my goals? See if you can simply recognize the initial feeling of guilt and then let it go and move on, as opposed to internalizing it.

**Replaying & Reviewing**
Sometimes we replay in our minds decisions we’ve already made or actions we’ve already taken. When things go wrong, it can often be helpful to consider and identify what might have been the cause or contributing factors in order to avoid the same mistake in the future, but it’s generally not helpful if the review is overly negative or self-critical, leading to regret or self-blame.

Instead of focusing on the negative, we can accept that what’s in the past is in the past, let it go, and learn to channel our thinking toward building awareness and preventing future mistakes. The idea is to notice and then move on.

**Preventing relapse involves reducing or managing internal and external risk factors and anticipating triggers.**

**Managing Internal Risk Factors**
Some mental or physical feelings create high-risk situations for nearly everyone—feeling tired, being physically ill, or not sleeping well, for example. There may also be some specific to you. Most of these are not things you get into on purpose; you’d avoid them if you could. But they sometimes do their damage before we really tune into them. Becoming aware of these internal risk factors is the most important step. Once you notice them, you can manage better by saying to yourself things like, “Whenever I skip breakfast, I get tired earlier in the
day and tend to drink sugary beverages to get through. What could I do differently next time?"

**Managing External Risk Factors**
Sometimes you can recognize and reduce external factors. For example, if you know that working late at night more than two days in a row is a high-risk situation for you—for not getting enough sleep, overeating at night, or feeling crabby the next day, for example—you’ll want to set a mental alarm—or a real one—to warn yourself before that third day happens.

**Anticipating Triggers**
Sometimes you can anticipate triggers and plan ahead for them. Writing out your plan may seem like over-doing things, but it often helps. If a trip might interfere with your exercise plan, for example, you may need to do some research and planning ahead about how you can exercise when away from home. Some triggers just happen in the spur of the moment and don’t allow for planning ahead, so you’ll have to think on your feet, but if you get into the habit of anticipating triggers and planning ahead, you’ll be less likely to experience these, and when you do, you’ll naturally be more prepared to think of a solution.

**Keys to learning from our setbacks and getting back on track involve interrupting all-or-nothing thinking, keeping self-blame under control, and keeping an experimental attitude.**

When you first notice a lapse, try to focus on what you might do next instead of what you’ve already done or not done. Ask yourself questions like, “What can I do to stop things here?” Be aware of always and never statements.

If you begin to notice guilt and self-blame, ask yourself, “Is telling myself this helping me turn things around?” If you find yourself dredging up all of your past mistakes and failures, that’s a sure sign that the self-blame has gone far past a helpful point. Of course, you could swing too far in the other direction and never hold yourself responsible for anything, but that’s probably not very likely. Positive change fails much more often from too much self-blame than it does from too little.

It’s natural and sometimes helpful to review and replay situations that didn’t go well. The key is to keep the focus on learning from past mistakes rather than on beating yourself up with them. Take any positive lessons to be learned from a setback, and then move on. As you replay slips or lapses in your mind, ask
yourself, “What were the warning signs that trouble was coming?” “When could I have interrupted the process?” Making changes in your life is an experiment. Keeping an experimental attitude means taking a step back and trying to learn something from a difficult experience. It may even help to imagine yourself as a scientist observing things from a distance. You can use the past to gather data to help you avoid the same mistake in the future, but keep your focus on the future and the positive changes you will make. And, of course, don’t forget to celebrate your successes along the way—large and small.

**This course has been just one step on your personal wellness journey.**

Hopefully you’ve become more aware of how your lifestyle choices—including behaviors and thoughts—can impact your physical health and overall wellbeing. We encourage you to continue building your self-awareness and practicing the suggestions presented throughout these lessons. Remember, it’s not about being perfect but about being engaged and getting back up when we fall down. Long-term change generally doesn’t happen over night. It can be tough. But you are smart and strong and capable, and change is possible. Stay positive, ask for help when you need it, and don’t beat yourself up if you make a mistake. That’s part of life. We’re all human, after all!

We wish you the very best and hope that you experience a healthy, happy, and productive life.

**Resources**

- "The New Science of Willpower and Change" Video Lecture (start at minute 6):
- "Listening to Shame" TED Talk:
- "The Power of Vulnerability" TED Talk:
- Self-Compassion.org
- MyHealth Tailored Intervention Modules
- The Road to Resilience – American Psychological Association
- Resilience: Build Skills to Endure Hardship
- 14 Mantras to Help You Build Positive Self-talk
- Positive Thinking: Reduce Stress by Eliminating Negative Self-Talk
- Mindfulness: How to Begin
- Changing Procrastination lesson

**Inspiration**

**Video Transcript**

Alicia: If I got any one message, it’s to be very proactive on how you handle, you know, your life and how you make decisions about your life.
Aby: Stay positive and stay motivated.
WalkAlong—Your Journey to Mental Wellness
Return to page 10 of the online lessons or visit these small steps directly for ways to help you get through your day.

Lesson content created by the Rothenberger Institute in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota. © 2017 Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved.