



# How Long Does It Take to Form a Habit?

## Plus 5 Tips to Make Good Habits Stick

by **Olivia Valdes**

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Conduct a quick Google search about habit formation and you'll probably learn that it takes a mere 21 days to form a habit. Or maybe 18, or 28, or even 31. The numbers vary, but the standard advice does not. Many self-help specialists suggest that, if you simply repeat a behavior for a specific number of days, you're destined to develop the habit.

But habit formation is not so simple. After all, many of us know from personal experience that some habits are remarkably easy to develop. If, for a few nights in a row, you tune in to a Netflix crime drama, you'll start bingeing night after night. Try to establish a [daily gym habit](#), however, and the cravings may not come so quickly. Why do some habits form easily while others seem so unlikely to last?

How long it takes to form a new habit depends on the strength of the old behavior. Creating a healthy eating habit will take longer for someone who's been eating ice cream every day for 10 years than for someone who eats ice cream once a week. Establishing a [twice-weekly gym routine](#) will be easier if you already have a once-weekly gym routine.

Instead of focusing on a specific deadline, take the habit formation process one day at a time. By employing the following strategies, you'll speed up the process and ensure your new habit sticks.

### 1. Define Small, Specific Goals

If you're working on habit development, you probably have big, sweeping goals in mind: keeping a more organized home, for example, or [turning in schoolwork on time](#). These goals are essential for your long-term motivation, but they won't help you establish and stick with new habits.

Why? Imagine setting the abstract goal of "[being more organized](#)." In this scenario, you've created a goal so vague and abstract that you won't be able to track your own success rate.

Even if you, say, organize your entire closet in a single day, you might still feel like a failure when you look at your messy kitchen.

A habit is simply a repeated behavior. Before you can develop a new habit, you'll need to define a small, specific behavioral goal. For example, instead of "be more organized", try "do laundry and vacuum every Sunday morning." This goal works because it's concrete. It's a behavior that you can repeat over and over until it becomes automatic – in other words, a habit.

## 2. Make It Easy for Yourself

Let's say you want to eat a healthier diet. You're motivated to make the change and you enjoy eating healthy food, so why won't the habit stick?

Think about the logistical and mental barriers that might be stopping you. Maybe you're too tired to cook after work, so you end up ordering unhealthy take-out meals more often than you'd like. Instead of trying to fight through the exhaustion, consider ways to work around the barrier. You could dedicate one weekend afternoon each week to preparing meals for the next five days. You could research pre-prepared healthy meal delivery services near you. You might even consider increasing your nightly sleep time to reduce your afternoon exhaustion.

This reframing strategy applies to any habit you've struggled to make stick. Instead of getting frustrated with yourself, think of ways to eliminate the barriers and make the habit-forming process easier.

## 3. Get an Accountability Partner

Being held accountable to another person increases motivation. We might sometimes fail to meet our own internal expectations, but we hate to let our friends and family down. Use psychology to your advantage by enlisting an accountability partner.

An accountability partner can help in a number of different ways. Sometimes, simply telling another person that you're trying to form a new habit is enough to keep you on track. You might set up recurring check-in sessions or ask your accountability partner to text you reminders and words of encouragement.

An accountability partner can also be someone working towards the same goal as you. If you're trying to build an exercise habit, find a friend who wants to hit the gym and set up a shared workout schedule. Even on those days when you'd rather stay in bed than use the elliptical machine, the thought of disappointing a friend will be enough to get you dressed and out the door.

## 4. Use External and Internal Reminders

Experiment with post-it notes, to do lists, daily phone alarms, and any other tool you can use to create external reminders. Remember that the process of creating a new behavior may involve

stopping an old behavior. In addition to creating reminders about desirable behaviors, you may need to remind yourself *not* to toss your unwashed clothes on the floor.

Internal reminders are important, too. If you find yourself trapped in an unhelpful thought process, you can use mental reminders to break the pattern. Choose a statement to repeat whenever negative thoughts arise. If you catch yourself thinking "I hate going to the gym," counter the thought with "...but I love how energized I feel after a workout."

## **5. Give Yourself Time**

Remember, habit formation is not a straight upward trajectory. If you slip up one day, don't stress. One small mistake will not erase the work you've already done. Developing new habits takes time, but with a smart, strategic approach, your habits will last for life.