

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Creating New Habits Make a Difference and Brain Health Matters

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Today we are looking at making — and keeping — New Year’s resolutions.

Happy New Year! Many of us welcomed 2021 with high expectations for a better year and the resolution to live a healthier life — just like last year, and the year before, and the year before that. What will be different in 2021? How can we make — and keep — our New Year’s resolutions? The best way to ensure our determination to improve our physical and brain health lasts beyond January is by creating new habits.

Research suggests that failing to keep our resolutions is linked to the goals we choose and how we implement change in our lives. Instead of setting many goals that overwhelm our brain, body and behavior, setting specific goals that match our own interests and values can put us on the path to success. The motivation for change must come from within. And we need a plan.

We need a strategy that is built on taking small, practical steps. If we repeatedly hit the “snooze” button before getting out of bed in the morning, a resolution to start an early morning workout routine is probably not going to be successful. If we can tie the new behavior to our existing habits, we have a better chance of seeing a real change.

There are two main drivers of human actions: **necessities** — food, sleep, avoidance of pain — and **rewards**. Creating new habits requires commitment and time. It may take a while before these changes become automatic. Habits are born in the brain and forming new habits requires developing new pathways, or neurocircuits, for these behaviors. The more we practice these actions the better the chances that the pathways become permanent.

Any new habit can be perceived by our brain as a **reward** if it motivates us, causes us to learn, or elicits pleasurable feelings. Our brain circuitry has a “reward system” that perceives the

reinforcement and translates that feeling into future actions. Neurons in the different regions of the brain's reward system communicate using the feel-good chemical dopamine. The pleasure we experience from the release of these neurochemicals provides the incentive our brains need to keep going. More information about changing our habits can be found in this [video](#) about the brain's reward system.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

To help you maintain your brain-healthy resolutions, the Brain Health Initiative and [Harvard Medical School](#) recommend these eight tips.

Set big goals. Ambitious goals can inspire you and the people around you. Your friends and family want you to succeed and will be happy to cheer you on and help you meet your goals. Studies have shown that you are more likely to achieve big goals than simple goals because greater challenges lead to higher brain performance. The higher the goal, the higher the performance.

Start with small steps. Setting small steps can move you toward big goals. Accomplishing each step is motivating and will keep you moving toward success. It activates the reward system in your brain and gives you a sense of satisfaction and creating momentum.

Weigh the pluses and the minuses. It can be difficult to make a change if you don't know why you're doing it. Unhealthy behaviors often have pleasurable payoffs as well as consequences. Your previous habits engaged your brain's reward system and these new behaviors have never been reinforced, so you are more likely to succeed if the benefits of change are more attractive than not changing. Look for ways to experience the enjoyable aspects of an unhealthy behavior, without the behavior itself. If you enjoy taking a break and going outdoors while having a smoke, take the break and enjoy it, but without a cigarette.

Commit yourself. Your motivation is connected to your identity, so it makes sense that it is easier to commit to goals that are related to your core values and sense of self. Sometimes it is easier for others to see these connections so look for a coach or look for others who share your goals in online groups.

Reward yourself. Celebrate as you tick off the small steps you accomplish on the way to your goal. Your brain's reward system plays a critical role in the reinforcement-learning cycle. When a behavior in a certain context is rewarded, that behavior and context are paired and tagged by your brain for later repetition. Rewarding yourself can provide the motivation to keep repeating that behavior. Don't wait until you've lost all 50 pounds to celebrate your success: celebrate the successes along the path, for example when you lose that first 5 pounds and each 5 pounds on the way! Don't wait until you cross the finish line to call yourself a winner.

Learn from the past. Past failures represent lessons learned and bring you a step closer to your goal. An emphasis on learning nurtures a growth mindset, making you more resilient to setbacks in achieving your goals. When you hit a roadblock, think back to the past and identify what worked well and do it again and reflect on lessons learned and what can be modified. If you took too big of a swing, maybe try breaking your goal down into smaller steps that aren't so daunting.

Keep trying. Your efforts don't have to be perfect. All of these steps — setting your goals, taking steps to change your behavior, committing yourself, learning from your wins and from mistakes, and celebrating your successes — engage your brain. Motivation, reward, learning, and executive function are critical in the goal process, and in living a brain healthy life. Keep your focus on reaching your goal and you will benefit just from trying.

Making a change can be daunting, but it doesn't have to be. Get the Special Health Report, *Simple Changes, Big Rewards: A practical, easy guide for healthy, happy living* to learn how to incorporate simple changes into your life that can reap big rewards.

And as always, remember to **adopt a Brain Healthy Lifestyle**, including thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, and the Academy for Brain Health and Performance to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the brain health movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).