

First-aid steps you can try today

These won't "cure" panic, but they often reduce the intensity enough to help you get through the moment.

1. Calm the body first (panic is a physical loop)

When a panic attack hits, your nervous system is in fight-or-flight. Try one of these for **2–5 minutes**:

- **Slow breathing:** Inhale through your nose for **4**, hold **2**, exhale through your mouth for **6**. Longer exhales tell your body you're safe.
- **Temperature reset:** Splash cold water on your face or hold something cold. It can quickly reduce adrenaline.
- **Grounding (5-4-3-2-1):** Name 5 things you see, 4 you feel, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste.

Important reminder during panic:

"This is uncomfortable, but it is not dangerous. It will pass."

2. For sleep tonight

Don't aim for "perfect sleep"—aim for *rest*.

- If you can't sleep after ~20 minutes, **get out of bed**, dim lights, do something boring (no phone if possible).
- Try a **body scan**: mentally relax each muscle from toes to head.
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine, and doom-scrolling in the evening.
- Even lying down with eyes closed and slow breathing counts as rest.

3. Reduce panic triggers during the day

- Eat regularly (low blood sugar worsens panic)
- Gentle movement (short walks)
- Limit news/social media for now

- Write worries down earlier in the day so they don't flood you at night
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Very important next step

Because this is happening **every day** and affecting your sleep, it's a strong sign to **talk to a professional** (doctor, psychiatrist, or therapist). Panic attacks are very treatable—with therapy, medication, or both—and many people feel significantly better within weeks.

If you're in Bangladesh and feel overwhelmed or unsafe:

- Reach out to **local emergency services** if you feel at risk
- Or contact a trusted friend/family member and tell them plainly: "*I'm not okay and need support.*"

If at any point you feel like you might hurt yourself or can't stay safe, please seek urgent help immediately.

The first time I researched about habits was when I became intensely aware of all the little things I would do everyday without realising that they are part of my habits system.

When trying to find out how I can take charge of my habits, create new ones wilfully and break old ones that I don't like, I went down a rabbit hole for several months where I read, thought about and practiced various techniques.

Over the years, I pushed my understanding and knowledge about habits to the back of the mind and fell into the thought process of "I know how to do this, I don't need to consciously think or work as hard on habits as I did many years ago."

That's the trap.

I started 2021 with a renewed focus on health. And in the first week itself, I made the most rookie mistake when it comes to creating new habits - I tried to do too much and too many things in one go.

And if that wasn't enough, while meditating I thought about how I've been trying (and failing) to make health a strong component of my life ever since I lost it about a year ago. And the reason I've failed again and again is because I became complacent around building habits, and not working on them deliberately.

Writing this blog post is a way for me to dig into my mind, research like a beginner to discover the things I've forgotten, and bring everything I know about habits to the forefront of my mind.

This entire week, I put my understanding of habit formation into practice and worked on it deliberately. I want to continue doing that throughout the year and forever, and hopefully this time I won't forget things or become complacent.

So here's a written guide to serve as a reminder for myself, and hopefully it can serve you as well.

How habits work

A habit is an action or behaviour that one performs repeatedly and often without conscious thought.

You could say that habits are the various subroutines developed and stored in our mind. These subroutines can be invoked via internal or external triggers.

External triggers could be an alarm, hearing a sound, a certain smell, putting your workout clothes at the edge of the bed and wearing them as soon as you wake up.

Internal triggers are intrinsic pathways that make you do something. These are formed as you repeat an action regularly.

For example - I wake up and make my bed immediately. It only takes two minutes and my mind sees it as a quick win. On the days when I get up and don't make my bed even after a few minutes, I start feeling weird. It's a little nagging feeling in my mind, and it goes away as soon as I make the bed. That's an internal trigger.

Your goal is to use external triggers to help you form a new habit, and with repetition over a period of time, you want to develop internal triggers for the same habits.

How habits are formed in the brain

As it turns out, the brain is an incredibly efficient computer. There's a part of this computer, called basal ganglia, which is responsible for maintaining these subroutines that we call habits.

The process goes like this.

When you start working on a new habit, your conscious mind or prefrontal cortex has to apply intentional effort towards doing an activity.

Well, that takes time and energy. And the brain is an efficient machine.

So when the brain observes that you're trying to do the same thing repeatedly, it creates a routine which then gets stored in your basal ganglia. There, the brain invokes this routine whenever it sees the trigger. This way, you "don't have to think" about doing something. You just do it.

You want to take all the good habits that you are trying to create and stuff them into your basal ganglia, so to say.

How many days to form a habit, and what is the 21/90 rule?

When you start your research around habits, there will be easy nuggets thrown around which are oversimplified forms of some factual research. You will read "it only takes 21 days to form a new habit" or something stupid like that.

Ignore all of this. Remind yourself that you are building a habit because you want it to become a part of you and who you are for the rest of your life.

And definitely don't take it easy after 21 days thinking "ah I've got this." That's how most of us who get on the path lose track. I'm guilty of that too, too many times.

So what do you do?

Here's my easy-to-follow framework on building new habits. I'm following it myself, and if I fail, I'll come back and update it wherever necessary.

How to build new habits

There's really 3 parts to forming new habits.

1. Have a strong WHY for the habit
2. Create a routine that will trigger you into performing your habit
3. Start with an intentionally simplified and small version of your habit

Let's dive in.

1. Have a strong WHY for the habit

Most of us start working on a new habit, mostly healthy new habits, when we are motivated by it. Motivation is an incredibly powerful tool. It helps you get off your butt and do things you don't particularly enjoy doing in the beginning.

Motivation can serve a driving force, but it's ephemeral. It dries up fast and without notice.

Your goal is to use motivation to help you during the initial days, especially if your mind is constantly talking to you and telling you “why don’t you relax instead of going for a run?” or “let’s watch that Netflix show until 1am so that you can’t wake up at 7am, no chance.”

One tool to capture motivation and invoke it again at a later time is to think deeply about WHY you are forming a new habit.

If you’re trying to take care of your health, degrading health markers (I got a recent scare around this which formed a part of the trigger) and keeping them at the right levels so you can lead a healthy and disease-free life is a strong WHY. It can motivate you during the initial days to spur yourself into action.

2. Create a routine that will trigger you into performing your habit

To make it easier to consciously perform a task, you want to set up as many pieces in your environment that help trigger it.

Here are two things that you should do:

1. Decide on the time of the day you will perform your habit. A fixed time makes it easier to follow through each day.
2. Decide what you will do as the first step in your habit. This is like the “intro” to your routine.

For my health goal, I’ve made exercising the first thing I do after I wake up. This removes every possible barrier or distraction towards actually performing the action.

The intro to my routine is - I finish brushing, put on my workout clothes and then leave my room. Sometimes I get a glass of water before.

3. Start with an intentionally simplified and small version of your habit

This is the part that will make or break any new habits you try to create.

In the first week of 2021, I made the mistake of doing too many things.

1. Wake up early at 6am (I’m used to waking up around 7-7.30am)
2. Exercise for 30 minutes. Multiple activities - jog, weight training.
3. Come back and meditate
4. Bathe, read for a bit and journal
5. Then get to work

I obviously failed. If you can spot my mistakes, great.

If not, here’s the reasons why I failed..

- I tried to create multiple habits, not just one. Even trying to wake up early is a habit.
- I put unnecessary load on myself. It would take me 1.5 hours to complete the entire routine, which is the opposite of short and easy to do.

Suffice to say, I struggled through the week and just stopped doing it last weekend.

Failing in the first week was the trigger for thinking deeply about the problem and ultimately writing this blog post.

Here's the simplified and small version of my new habit:

1. Wake up at 7am (because I already am doing that, no extra effort)
2. Exercise for 15 minutes. Only 1 activity - jog.
3. Come back, bathe and get to work.

My week went really well, and I didn't miss exercise a single day. Neither did it feel like a task on any given day. And it's even making me look forward to doing it again.

So much so that I finished writing this post, went for a jog, and came back to finish editing it.

(Before the edit, the above sentence read as: So much so that after I finish writing this post, I'll go for my jog.)

How to make new habits stick

You've started a new habit, and you've performed it for a few days or weeks without any hiccups.

Congratulations! The battle is not over though.

You want to continue performing this habit, improve over time, and ensure you don't fall off the wagon so that a year from now, you don't have to repeat the whole thing.

Here's how you can make it easier to stick to habits in the long term.

1. Pick one habit at a time

Until the habit you are currently working on isn't completely internalised, don't start something new. You'll jeopardise the old and the new habit.

Sankalp reminds me from time to time that he exercised consistently for 15 minutes a day, for 365 days before he started increasing the load. Now he's able to do 30-45 minutes a day with the same ease as he once did only 15 minutes.

Be patient and play the long game.

2. Perform once a day, everyday

Repetition helps form pathways in your basal ganglia. The more often you repeat an activity, the faster that pathway will form.

Perform your new habit everyday, and try to have zero exceptions for it. Not in the first 7 days, or 30 days, or 90 days.

3. Don't miss more than two days in a row

Life happens, and you may end up skipping a day here and there. It's OK and definitely don't beat yourself up when it does happen.

Instead, be intensely mindful on that day that you should not miss the next. If you are going through hectic days, reduce your commitment to your habit but definitely do it.

For example - if your workout habit is for 15 minutes, on a particularly hectic day just do it for 5 minutes instead of skipping it.

Another example - if you have a daily writing habit of 500 words, on a particular day when you're feeling uninspired, write 100 words instead of skipping it.

Until a habit is permanent (sometimes it might not be even after 365 days), it's incredibly easy to fall off the wagon.

The smallest thing you can do to prevent that from happening is by never missing two days in a row.

4. Increase the intensity slowly and over time

This one is tricky and could go wrong. In excitement of performing a new habit and feeling great that I did well for 1 or 2 weeks already, I'll try to do more. That's just the kind of person I am. I like to see growth, everywhere and all the time (yeah I know!).

If you do increase the intensity of your habit, it could make it too difficult and unpleasant to perform. Your mind will come up with (valid) reasons to avoid it. And before you know it, you're off the habit.

For example - if I am feeling extra confident of last week and decide to start mixing up my workout, or doing 30 minutes instead of 15, I might last a few days but this time next week I'll be off the habit for sure.

Therefore, I'm not even going to try increasing the intensity. Until this 15 minute routine itself becomes so ingrained into my life and I perform it for 30/60/90 days or until it feels super duper easy, I won't increase the intensity.

And when I do increase it, it will be slightly. 15 minutes of jog will turn into 15 + 5 minutes of pushups. I'll repeat that for 30/60/90 days or until it feels super duper easy and only then increase the load again.

5. Reward yourself for performing a habit

Humans, or rather animals perform any action for survival or for satisfying a craving. Humans are the only animals that can use its prefrontal cortex to conjure good cravings to have, and then wilfully exert force to perform those actions.

In every habit you create or inculcate, there will be a craving that you will be rewarding. You just need to identify it and make it your focus.

In my case, focusing on health can potentially satisfy 2 cravings.

1. Bring my health markers to completely green.
2. See myself in the mirror and feel good about it, v/s how right now I think "why did I let it slip".

Both of these are perfectly valid cravings to reward.

Identify the rewards in your habits and satisfy them. They will make you feel good, especially as you start to see progress.

And they will serve as motivation to seek that reward on the days you don't really feel like doing it.

6. Track your habits in a visual format

I used to use elaborate habit tracking mechanisms on paper, and using complex apps with features like reminder, streak and what not.

In 2019-20, I scrapped everything for a while and didn't track habits at all.

What I observed was, a habit tracker is only required for new habits that you are still trying to inculcate and make it a part of your subconscious routines.

So I still needed a habit tracker, but I was tired of complex systems.