

Pushing Past Your Plateau

We promise ourselves we'll change our lifestyles for better health. We start diets, launch exercise programs or try to quit smoking. And then we stall. We hit a plateau, putting us at risk of losing precious gains or quitting altogether.

A healthy lifestyle change is just that -- change. "A lot of people believe that change is easy, but we are fundamentally conservative creatures, and we don't change until we have to," says Michael J. Mahoney, Ph.D., an American Psychological Association spokesman and professor at the University of North Texas. "It doesn't take much to throw us off course because we are such creatures of routine."



So sticking with a new routine is tough. Dr. Mahoney suggests you focus on being consistent, especially in the first six weeks of a change. That way, you build new patterns of behavior. Once that happens, odds are you'll "begin to speak to yourself about the change in a more positive tone, instead of a negative one."

Make a pledge

Pledging to reward yourself if you meet your goals can be a great tool for getting past plateaus. The reward that awaits you can serve as a symbol of what you're trying to do and give you something to look forward to. "The symbol could be anything," notes Dr. Mahoney. It could be a piece of jewelry or a new golf club, for instance. Once you earn it, you can set your sights on a new reward for the next step.

When you're trying to get past a plateau, he recommends you focus each day on your behavior, your effort, rather than on your goal -- the amount of weight you'd like to lose, for instance. One crucial skill you'll need is patience. This, more than anything, will help get you past plateaus.

"Most people don't see a traffic jam as an opportunity to practice patience," Dr. Mahoney says. But the skills that help you put up with a stalled interstate "will help you realize and understand that plateaus are a natural part of life and they're going to occur, so if you learn patience you'll get over plateaus." "Progress," he notes, "is not always linear. If we understand this going in, it helps us be more patient with the plateaus, so that we can get past them and keep going."

Six steps to progress

Are you stuck on a plateau? Here are six tips for pushing onward from Michael Mercer, Ph.D., coauthor of the book *Spontaneous Optimism: Proven Strategies for Health, Prosperity and Happiness*:

- 1. Define your aim clearly.** "It's impossible to hit your target if you don't know exactly what you're aiming at," says Dr. Mercer, who gives about 50 speeches a year to executives and other audiences.
- 2. Don't let laziness creep in.** "Sure, it's easier not to do something," he says. Instead, stay focused on your path. If you promised yourself you'd exercise at 6 a.m., don't hit the snooze button when the alarm goes off. Remind yourself firmly about your goals and get moving.
- 3. When you don't want to exercise or you want to quit your diet, take three seconds to picture how you want to look or feel at the end of your program.** A lot of people begin such programs because they want to look attractive to others, while others are interested in improving their health.
- 4. Use a time-limit approach to your program.** "Give yourself, say, 12 weeks to accomplish a goal within your program," he says. When you reach that goal, set a new one and give yourself another 12 weeks. "This enables you to track your progress and helps you to define your target. Use the scale, measuring tape or other device to measure your progress in the time period and to help you set new goals. The best cure for putting things off is a deadline."
- 5. Give yourself rewards for reaching your daily, weekly and monthly goals.** "For instance, tell yourself you'll go to a movie you've been wanting to see if you get your exercise in that day," he says.
- 6. Think about committing to a self-punishment if you fail.** "I worked with a group that had to write a check to charity and put it in my hands. If they didn't reach the goal, which was well within their limits, I was to mail the check by a particular date," Dr. Mercer says. "Every one of them reached the goal."

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