

Tiny Habits



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In this article, Katherine discusses how small changes can have big impacts on creating new habits and supporting health.

Ten years ago I suffered a period of burnout. It was a feeling of complete exhaustion when I struggled to muster the energy to open a can of beans to feed my kids. As a GP I knew what I should be doing. I should have been eating healthily, sleeping, exercising, goal-setting, meditating, and socialising with my friends and family. But I didn't know where to start. I didn't permit myself to start small, to meet myself where I was: exhausted, overwhelmed, and burnt out.

I came across the Headspace app amid a period of social media doom scrolling and downloaded it. I knew I had to start somewhere. Each morning, I came downstairs, turned the kettle on, and opened the app. It was a while before I tried 10 minutes of meditation. I didn't feel anything and certainly didn't feel any better, but I continued to persevere - turning on the kettle, opening up the app, and, when I felt like it, doing 10 minutes of meditation. I started to heal. My kids noticed when I hadn't meditated as I was snapping at them. By starting my day with something small, something positive, and something for me I created a ripple effect: I started to eat and sleep better, I was exercising again, thinking about my future, and socialising.

We are all human regardless of our jobs, education, or knowledge of what we 'should be doing' but adopting and sustaining healthy lifestyle changes is a perpetual challenge. How often do we consider this when telling patients to take their preventer inhaler morning and night without forgetting or to keep up their pulmonary rehabilitation exercises daily? When we tell them they should be exercising 30 minutes 5 times a week, and eating five pieces of fruit and vegetables a day, do we ever stop and consider if we are doing the same? We are no different from our patients and the daunting prospect of overhauling our habits can lead to resistance and inertia.

Amidst this complexity, there exists a simple, yet profound approach pioneered by behaviour change scientist BJ Fogg: Tiny Habits®. This paradigm shift in behaviour change offers a promising option for us as healthcare professionals to guide our patients, and let's face it ourselves, toward sustainable transformations. In this article, we delve into the principles of Tiny Habits® and explore practical strategies for implementing them with our patients.

Understanding Tiny Habits

At its core, Tiny Habits® is rooted in the belief that lasting change begins with tiny behaviours that last less than 30 seconds and can be performed even when we are at our lowest ebb and unmotivated. In fact, it takes motivation out of the equation altogether as it is unreliable and inconsistent. BJ Fogg, director of the Behaviour Design Lab at Stanford University, developed this framework based on his extensive research in behavioural change psychology. Central to the Tiny Habits® methodology are three key components:



1. Anchor: Identifying existing routines or prompts that can act as anchors for our new habits. These anchors are already part of our routine, they are solid and automatic. Very often we aren't even aware of them. They can be daily activities, such as brushing teeth, getting in and out of bed, putting the dishwasher on, or turning on the kettle. These are our new Post-it notes or reminders to do our new behaviour NOW.

2. Behaviour: Once you have decided what behaviour you want to introduce into your life i.e. drinking 2 pints of water every morning, reading for 30 minutes before bed, or walking for 30 minutes 5 times a week you distill this down into a tiny behaviour i.e. something that takes less than 30 seconds - One sip of water, opening up a book or putting on your walking shoes. You attach this new behaviour to your Anchor

3. Celebrate: And then you Celebrate. This is immediate and needs to be authentic to you. It can be as simple as feeling good inside or as fun as dancing on the spot; whatever works for you. The Celebration releases a burst of dopamine in your brain telling it that this is something good, something that you want to do more of, and over time the tiny behaviour grows organically into something bigger

Implementing Tiny Habits® in Patient Care

Tiny Habits® offers a pragmatic approach to supporting patients in adopting healthier behaviours. Whether it's managing chronic conditions, improving nutrition, or increasing physical activity, integrating Tiny Habits® into patient care can facilitate sustainable lifestyle changes. Here's how we can leverage the Tiny Habits® framework:

1. Personalised Assessment

Begin by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the patient's current lifestyle, including their habits, routines, and areas for improvement. This personalised approach ensures that Tiny Habits are tailored to the individual's unique circumstances and preferences.

2. Identifying Anchors

Collaborate with the patient to identify existing Anchors that can serve as the foundation for new habits. For instance, if a patient regularly drinks tea in the morning, the routine of turning on the kettle can be leveraged as an anchor for introducing a new habit, such as doing a squat or a deep mindfulness breath.

3. Introducing Tiny Habits

Encourage patients to start small by introducing tiny habits that align with their health goals. Emphasise simplicity, ensuring that each tiny habit is easily achievable within their daily routine. For example, a patient aiming to drink more water could start by drinking a sip of water after cleaning their teeth.

4. Cultivating Consistency

Highlight the importance of consistency in building habits.

Encourage patients to practice their tiny habits consistently, ideally at the same time and context each day. Consistency reinforces neural pathways associated with the behaviour, making it more automatic over time.

5. Celebrating Progress

Encourage patients to celebrate their achievements, no matter how awkward it might make them feel. Work with them, to find a celebration that feels natural and authentic. Encourage them to acknowledge and appreciate their efforts, whether it's with a verbal affirmation, a fist pump, or a simple moment of reflection. Celebrating progress reinforces positive behaviour and strengthens motivation for continued action.

6. Iterative Adaptation

Recognise that behaviour change is an ongoing process that may require adjustments along the way. Regularly reassess the effectiveness of the tiny habits and be prepared to modify or introduce new habits as needed. There is considerable overlap with Quality Improvement methodology – Plan, Do, Study, Act. Flexibility and adaptability are essential components of sustainable behaviour change.

Case Study: Supporting Martha in Managing Her COPD

Martha, a 65-year-old woman, has been living with COPD for several years. Despite receiving education on the importance of pulmonary rehabilitation, she struggles to incorporate the prescribed exercises into her daily routine. Martha's GP, recognising the need for personalised support, implements the Tiny Habits framework to facilitate behaviour change:

Personalised Assessment

Martha's GP conducts a comprehensive assessment of her COPD management, including her current exercise habits, medication adherence, and challenges she faces in her daily life.

Identifying Anchor Behaviours

Through collaborative discussion, Martha and her GP identify existing anchors that can serve as triggers for new habits. They discover Martha consistently takes her inhalers after preparing breakfast, making this routine an ideal anchor for introducing new habits.

Tiny Habit 1: After taking her inhalers, Martha will perform two squats and celebrate.

Tiny Habit 2: After Martha sits down to eat her breakfast she will take two deep mindfulness breaths, focusing on deep inhalation and controlled exhalation then celebrate.

Tiny Habit 3: After Martha sits down to watch TV she will pick up her phone and text a friend from her Pulmonary Rehabilitation class.

Cultivating Consistency

Martha commits to practicing her Tiny Habits consistently, aiming to complete them at the same time and context each day. Her GP emphasises the importance of repetition in

building habits and encourages Martha to persevere, even on challenging days - 'Practise Makes Better'.

Celebrating Progress

Martha celebrates her achievements by acknowledging her efforts after completing each tiny habit. She finds happiness in the sense of accomplishment and uses positive self-talk to reinforce her commitment to improving the management of her COPD.

Iterative Adaptation

As Martha progresses in her COPD management journey, her GP regularly assesses the effectiveness of the Tiny Habits and makes adjustments as needed. They explore additional strategies to support Martha's adherence and address any barriers that may arise.

Impact and Outcomes

Over time, Martha experiences significant improvements in her COPD management through the consistent practice of Tiny Habits. By integrating squats and breathing exercises into her morning routine and proactively keeping in touch with friends to reduce her isolation, Martha feels more in control of her condition and experiences fewer exacerbations. She reports feeling more confident in her ability to manage her COPD.

Conclusion

The case of Martha illustrates the transformative potential of Tiny Habits in respiratory care. By focusing on small, manageable actions and leveraging existing routines, we can give patients agency to initiate and sustain healthy behaviours essential for managing respiratory conditions. Through personalised assessment, targeted intervention, and ongoing support, Tiny Habits offer a practical and effective approach to improving adherence to treatment plans and enhancing respiratory outcomes. As healthcare continues to evolve, integrating the principles of Tiny Habits into clinical practice holds promise for revolutionising respiratory care and giving patients the agency to live better.