

How to Keep Good Habits Post-Lockdown

You'll technically have to 'relearn' to cook each meal, or to exercise regularly or to read a book a week. But there are some shortcuts.

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The coronavirus pandemic has brought with it a global economic downturn; unemployment in the United States has reached its highest level since the Great Depression, and many people whose jobs have not been outright eliminated have seen their work, and lives, radically transformed. But as old daily rituals are leveled, for better or worse, new ones have emerged and taken their places.

Perhaps you are fitting in frequent runs or a consistent yoga practice, maintaining better correspondence with friends, or sleeping according to your body's optimal schedule. Or you may be spending more time in the kitchen. As Laurie Furch, a baker support specialist with the King Arthur Flour Baker's Hotline, said, "Everybody in America has got a sourdough starter right now."

Wendy Wood, a professor of psychology and business at the University of Southern California, wrote in her 2019 book, "Good Habits, Bad Habits," that "major life changes are stressful times full of uncertainty." But at the same time, she noted, "we are freed up to practice new behaviors without interference from established cues and our habitual responses to them. Discontinuity forces us to think. By making fresh decisions, we act in new ways — ones that may work better for us."

Habits don't just motivate actions, they also play a role in structuring your thoughts. This makes it so something like, "'Let's go for a run' feels very much on the menu of options in a way that, maybe a couple of months ago, it wasn't," said Fiery Cushman, a professor of psychology at Harvard. In an otherwise challenging and dismal time, these beneficial developments present a small consolation.

So, how do you maintain these new, good habits upon re-entering the world after Covid-19-related lockdowns? Unfortunately, the science says you're basically going to have to relearn them once you resume your pre-lockdown schedule. "Habits are such slow-forming memory traces that they're also very slow to decay," Dr. Wood said in a recent interview. "When you are put back in the same context, even if it's been a while, your old habits will be activated." And they'll compete with the updated ones you've grown accustomed to.

But there's good news: Certain strategies can help you learn these new habits again, and you can start preparing now.

Take note of what has worked — and what hasn't.

In 2012, seeking a positive outlet during a period of depression, the runner and activist Alison Mariella Désir started to train for a marathon. "The discipline, the sense of freedom, sense of community, connection to something bigger than myself: All of those mental health reasons are what kept me outside," Ms. Désir explained. "It's important to know what your motivation is, because then you can feed that motivation."

There's science to back that up. Gabriele Oettingen, a professor of psychology at New York University, recommended interrogating what will be the most worthwhile for you through a process called WOOP, short for "wish, outcome, obstacle, plan." You set a specific post-lockdown wish, and then vividly imagine the primary positive outcome of achieving it, as well as the potential obstacles to it, such as an old, pernicious habit.

"You kind of pre-experience it in your mind, and by doing that, you will understand whether this really fits into the opening-up life as it fit into your lockdown life," Dr. Oettingen said. Once you've mentally experienced these obstacles, you're better prepared and more energized to respond to them, and you can execute a plan.

Make it easy.

Awareness of what has worked — and hasn't — will permit you to set up your environment in a way that reinforces, and doesn't undermine, your new activities. Habits rely on repetition, so make it easier to repeat them.

"There's no handicapping in habit formation; challenge is not the point," Dr. Wood wrote in "Good Habits, Bad Habits." If you're planning a morning run, lay out your running clothes before going to bed. And if you're hoping to maintain a consistent bedtime, Matthew Walker, a professor of neuroscience and psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, recommends turning off at least half the lights in your home an hour before you go to bed and allowing yourself to use your phone (or other screens) only while standing up. Light sources inhibit the production of the hormone melatonin, which signals to your body that it's time for sleep.

Or maybe a new practice resulted from an abundance of time; baking loaves of bread from scratch is perhaps not a weeknight activity under less fraught circumstances. You can break your baking into manageable steps and focus on faster-yielding, and more immediately useful, projects, like quick breads and muffins.

Planning to bake in the morning? Ms. Furch recommends you weigh and measure out your ingredients the night before. Take advantage of freezer space, to store cookie dough, for example, so it's ready to pop into the oven when you want it.

Incorporate your desired habit into your routine.

“Stacking” the new habit onto existing routines, Dr. Wood said, can encourage you to repeat, and therefore maintain, a series of behaviors. Your morning and evening routines might already be especially robust; try stacking new habits into those periods. Feed your sourdough starter on Thursday evening and Friday each week, perhaps while cleaning up from meals, so it’s ready to use when the weekend rolls around. You probably set your alarm to wake up each day; Dr. Walker suggested getting into the practice of setting a bedtime alarm, too.

There are other ways to make space for new habits. Ms. Désir sets calendar invitations for herself, so she knows she has allotted time in her schedule for her runs. Her son, belted into a running stroller, is her constant companion, so she can balance running with child care.

Similarly, a bicycling habit picked up in quarantine can be applied to your commute. Or if you’ve been cooking regularly, Klancy Miller, a cookbook author and the founder of the forthcoming food magazine “For the Culture,” recommends keeping a list of recipes that you’ve discovered you like and making one or more of them weekly. (Ms. Miller’s 2016 book, “Cooking Solo: The Fun of Cooking for Yourself,” went into a new printing as a result of increased sales during this lockdown period.) “Take note of your favorites and treat yourself to them,” she said.

Nurture the communities you’ve built.

In Norwich, Vt., King Arthur Flour has continued to operate its Baker’s Hotline throughout the pandemic, offering a community to people in isolation — people who might usually be able to consult friends or family for recipe tips. “People are really looking for that sense of connection,” Ms. Furch said.

Some communities have also sprouted virtually. “It’s really cool to see beginners, to see people who you don’t typically see advertised or on covers of magazines joining in this way of movement,” Ms. Désir said of the digital clubs she’s involved with. That network will continue to play an important role in maintaining your habit, both rewarding your behavior and holding you accountable. Keep up with your running club, either over a fitness-tracking social app like Strava or in person; continue meeting with your quarantine book club at the same time you’re used to; stay in touch with your volunteer network, if you’ve taken this time to get more involved with your neighborhood.

But avoid drawing comparisons between yourself and others, especially over social media, which, Ms. Désir remarked, is a potential route to burnout.

Allow yourself to adapt, and be realistic.

You might not run, cook, wash your hands perfectly, get to bed on time or resist online shopping every day. That’s OK. If you’re feeling fatigued or overwhelmed, try lowering the stakes; be realistic about what you can do. Cook something familiar or simply order in; fire off a quick postcard or email to your pen pal, instead of writing an entire letter; run without your watch or app, or schedule rest days into your routine.

After about three months of lockdown, for example, Ms. Miller finally ordered takeout. “I had been cooking three meals a day, kind of since forever,” she said, “and I just thought, I can’t. I cannot. I can’t do another set of washing pots and pans.”

The reopening will challenge your newly formed habits — they may look a little different in the future than they have during this period of isolation and will, in fact, *be* different. But resuming your pre-pandemic schedule isn’t the only potential obstacle. “There are a lot of things that are involved when we think about moving in the outdoors,” Ms. Désir said, particularly citing concerns or fears people of color might have about policing and anti-Black vigilantism.

Even though a habit is, by its nature, a fixed behavior, you still need to be adaptable — now and in the future — in order to maintain it as the circumstances surrounding it change. A 2015 study co-written by Dr. Cushman found that habits essentially help structure your planning to reach a goal, even if the way you get there is a little different each time.

“Whatever your routine has been through this quarantine is going to change, so it’s another period of adaptation,” Ms. Désir added. “Self-compassion and grace helps you get onto a routine faster.”

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