



21 Days to Develop or Change a Habit

The aim of this programme is to develop or change a habit in 21 days. For 21 days, without a break, your aim is to consistently practice, develop or stop a habit. If a day is missed, the 'penalty' is that you must start again from day 1 ☹️ You are encouraged to work in partnership with a friend or member of your family. Their aim is to support and encourage you throughout the 21 days as you make progress.

Current research focuses on how we can change our thinking. What is meant by this, and how can we benefit from it?

Years ago, most scientists had the impression that the brain was hardwired, and that once you got to 17 or 18 years old, your brain and your personality are set. But your brain cells constantly form new connections with each other, which means your brain has the ability to change. For example, if you have a regular habit that's been 'wired' into your brain, such as relaxing over a drink every night, then certain brain cells will have been forged on account of that behaviour. If you then change that behaviour, the brain no longer has use for those old connections, and they begin to shrink. And new connections are formed when you start to practise new habits.

Can this knowledge help in everyday life, for example, by replacing negative thought patterns with more positive thoughts?

Yes! Your brain and body is not something you are simply born with, whose health and functioning you can do nothing about. Instead, you are continually growing, changing, moulding and shaping your brain and your body. You have far more of an effect on your mental and physical health than you'd think. In many ways, it comes down to what you choose to give your attention to. Once we begin to imagine ourselves as being more positive, the brain starts to create connections associated with that. And the more time you spend on it, even if it's just dreaming about being more positive, the less time you're spending on the old patterns. The old connections associated with negative thinking begin to shrink and the new ones begin to expand.

Even just by imagining about taking a new approach this can affect how brains operate

There was a famous Harvard experiment, the Piano Study, conducted by the neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone in 1994. He took a group of volunteers who had never played the piano, and asked half of them to practise playing a simple combination of five notes for two hours a day over five days. The second group simply had to imagine playing those same five notes, for the same time periods, but without touching a piano. The volunteers had brain scans each day and by the fifth day the area of the brain governing each of the muscles used to play those notes had grown substantially but amazingly you couldn't tell the difference between those who'd actually hit the keys and those who'd just imagined playing the notes.

What steps can we take to kickstart a change in our thinking patterns or our habits?

If you want to adopt a more positive approach, we recommend our **21 Days to Develop or Change a Habit** approach. This approach acknowledges that it takes, on average, 21 days to wire in a new behaviour neurologically. The approach is a challenge to see whether people could go 21 days without complaining; without moaning, judging, or criticising. You start by wearing a wristband, and every time you complain you move it to your other wrist, and then back when you next complain. Most people find that they end up changing it a dozen times within the first hour. But after about a week most people are able to go a few days without a single complaint and not only do they feel better, everyone around them seems happier. And what's really interesting is that by topping the complaining habit and creating a new habit of reframing negatives into a something more positive, you're forcing your brain to do things differently, and it will start laying down new connections to support this new behaviour.

What happens if there is something you really need to let off steam about for example maybe you have a teenage son who keeps talking back to you and you've reached the end of your patience?

You need to catch yourself complaining, and then try to find another way of saying the same thing in a more positive way. So if you were talking to a friend about your son, you'd think how you could express it in a more understanding way, so you might say 'I know my son's having a hard time and it's making things really difficult for me, but I'm determined to understand him and to help her.' It's not a magic bullet, it does take time and practice, but it does encourage you to be more understanding.

Does this 21 day approach work for changing other habits too?

Yes. After two to three weeks you'll have significant neuroplastic change in the brain, and the pull of your old habit will have reduced. It could be something as simple as replacing coffee with herbal tea, or you want to give up chocolate for something healthier. After three weeks, because of neuroplasticity, your taste buds will adapt and become more accustomed to the herbal tea or the chocolate substitute those things will have actually become more appealing.

Do you need to work at maintaining your new behaviour?

Yes, because the old connections in the brain don't vanish completely, and there may be triggers in your life, or certain stressors, that are linked to the old behaviour. So you need to be aware of the possibility that old habits will resurface, and be prepared to override them with your new patterns. Like anything, it does take work but it gets easier, and you will be motivated by your results and how much better you feel. Some of the old patterns are still faintly there and there will always be the odd trigger but you get used to saying, "I'm not going to choose that."



The aim of this programme is to develop or change a habit in 21 days. For 21 days, without a break, your aim is to consistently practice, develop or stop a habit. If a day is missed, the 'penalty' is that you must start again from day 1 ☹️ You are encouraged to work in partnership with a friend or member of your family. Their aim is to support and encourage you throughout the 21 days as you make progress.

21 Days to Develop or Change a Habit

Day	Target? <i>Remember to build up your target slowly</i>	What was achieved? <i>Try to achieve your target. Even if you don't on a particular day, try to do something!</i>	How did you feel? <i>Try to gauge how your feelings change as you develop</i>	Witness <i>Initials of your support friend</i>
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				
19				
20				
21				