



MDwise

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Healthy Eating: Overcoming Barriers to Change

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Introduction

Replacing a bad habit with a good habit takes time and patience. It requires several steps, from setting your goals to getting support. One of the important steps is figuring out what your barriers are.

What has stopped you from changing your eating habits in the past? What do you think might stop you in the future? Identifying these barriers now—and having a plan to help you get past them—will help you change bad habits into good habits.

- A barrier is anything that causes you to slip up in your goal to make lifestyle changes, such as changing your eating habits.
- Figuring out what those barriers are and how you can get around them can help you reach your healthy eating goals.
- When you hit a barrier, get support—from your family, friends, or doctor.
- Slip-ups are normal. Expect them, and have a plan for how to get back on track.

How do you overcome barriers to healthy eating?

The best way to overcome barriers is to identify them ahead of time and have a backup plan to deal with them. Some barriers are the kind that keep you from even trying to change a habit. Other barriers pop up later.

When you hit a barrier—and most people do—get support. Talk to your family members and friends to see if someone wants to be active with you or cheer you on. If you have concerns about your health, talk to your doctor to make sure you're doing your activities safely.

There are many reasons why you may not want to try to change your eating habits. Here are some frequent barriers and some solutions to them.

"I'll never be able to change how I eat."

Not believing you can do something is often really just a fear of failure. People put off making changes in their lives because of this fear. This kind of barrier can keep you from even starting to make a lifestyle change. But it can also crop up on days when you feel discouraged.

Possible solutions:

- Carefully define "success" and "failure." If your goal is simply to improve your food choices or lose a modest amount of weight, you will probably be successful. A goal to lose an unrealistic amount of weight, "cure" a disease, or eat "perfectly," is just not realistic and may very well lead to failure.
- Set small, measurable goals. Eating two pieces of fruit a day is a pretty easy goal to reach. Giving up your favorite food is much harder, and you will be more likely to not even try.

"I don't have time to make changes."

This is a very common reason not to change. It can take the form of "My life is too busy," or "I'm always feeling rushed," or "I have more important things to do."

Possible solutions:

- Learn ways to manage your time better. Find time-management techniques that work for you.
- Ask others how they manage to fit good nutrition into their lives.
- Don't try to make too many changes at once. Small changes take less time, but they add up.
- Ask your family and friends for help as you change your eating behavior. This may involve having them help you to free up your time.
- Cook quick meals. Many people believe that to eat well, you need a lot of time to cook. But there are many cookbooks on how to prepare quick, healthy meals.

"I don't like health foods."

Many people use this reason or variations of it such as "I don't like vegetables," "I don't like low-fat foods," or "I really crave sweets and high-fat foods. I'll miss them." Often a fear of the unknown is behind these reasons.

Possible solutions:

- Give it time. Food preferences are slow to change, but they do change over time. Making a new behavior a habit usually takes 3 months or more. Decide to withhold your judgments about what you like and dislike in foods until you have given the new foods a chance.
- Take it slow. You don't have to give up favorite foods completely, but you may have to change how often you eat them. Make your changes small, and give yourself time to adjust.
- Recognize how others influence your food preferences. Carrots aren't nearly as tempting (or as profitable for the sellers) as cheesecake. And advertisers know it and play upon people's preferences. Recognize advertising ploys as a way of manipulating your tastes. Also, if you think "rabbit food" when you eat carrots or salad, try to replace these negative messages with more positive messages about these foods.

"Health foods cost too much."

It's true that things like fresh produce, whole-grain breads, and other healthy food items can cost more than fast foods and junk foods. Sometimes it seems like your budget would do better if you just ate cheap fast food every day.

But you can stay within your budget by putting in some extra time planning, shopping, and cooking. And the more time you invest, the more money you'll save.

Possible solutions:

- Save money by learning and planning. Plan a week's worth of meals at a time so that you're not as likely to go out to eat on the spur of the moment. Plan menus so that you have leftovers for future meals.
- At the grocery store, save money by buying store brands instead of name brands and by shopping in the bulk foods aisle.
- Buy day-old, whole-grain bread at a discount at a local bakery outlet.
- If you're not used to cooking, start learning. It's not hard to cook simple, inexpensive, healthy meals.

"I'll be criticized or made fun of if I eat health food."

Many people are held back from changing their eating habits because of how they think it will look to others. It can be hard to stick with a healthy eating plan when family and friends don't want to join you.

Possible solutions:

- Find others who want to change. Take a class on cooking healthy meals, find a Web-based community, or involve your family. Many people are working on nutrition issues, and they can give you support.
- Find places to eat where you are comfortable.
- Order special foods (such as meat broiled instead of fried or salad dressing on the side) casually and with minimal fuss. Ordering in this way is common, and both the cooking and wait staff are likely to be quite familiar with your requests.

"I'm not good at making changes."

This reason may take the form of "I'm too old (or fat, or set in my ways) to make changes." Often, low self-esteem makes it hard to change.

Possible solutions:

- Make small and measurable changes. They are easier to make and usually cause less fear because there is less at risk. For example, try eating one more piece of fruit a day than you usually do.
- Work on self-esteem, if this is an issue. Counseling can help with issues of self-esteem. The success you feel from improving your eating habits may improve your self-esteem as well. Bit by bit, you may begin to change the way you view yourself and your ability to change.

To help you identify your own barriers to changing your eating habits, think about the last few times you thought about changing your eating behavior but didn't follow through with it. What held you back? Write down your reasons. Then for each of your reasons, write a response that helps you reconsider your choice. Look at your list of reasons and responses whenever you are about to make a choice about what to eat.

Credits

Current as of: September 8, 2021

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RR2022_147 (11/2022)