

May 2012 | greatist.com | Susan Olding | Wellness

[ NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with Simple Again's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you. ]

## Build A Better You, One Habit At A Time

Let's say you want to get in better shape. Of course, you're smart, informed, and know exactly what to do. So you've listed the changes you need to make, pinning them to the fridge next to the vision board and inspirational photos. Here's the only problem: You haven't actually done anything on the list. You're struggling with the getting started part.

Or maybe that's not you at all.

**Maybe you're the "fit one" among your friends.** Maybe you're even a trainer. Countless friends, family members, co-workers, or clients seek your advice. And you send them workout plans, links to the best websites and apps, meal plans, and lots of encouragement.



Yet it's always the same story. They can't seem to follow through. What's going on here?

After all, it's not *that* difficult to eat more veggies and lean protein. Not *that* impossible to cut out the diet soda and drink more water or green tea. Not *that* overwhelming to lift weights several times a week, add some high intensity interval training, and get more sleep. That's because it *isn't* difficult. Providing you're already doing that stuff.

**What is difficult is trying to do all those things at once.** Especially if the practices are brand-new and none of them are daily habits. That's because getting fit — or learning any new skill — is a bit like juggling. If you begin by randomly throwing a dozen balls in the air, what's going to happen?

*Splat.*

The solution to this problem? Start practicing with one ball. When you've got that one under control, add another. Get that one under control, and add another. And so on. Soon, you'll be running off to join the circus.

### One Habit at a Time

To support this analogy, bestselling author Leo Babauta estimates that when people focus on changing a single behavior at a time, the likelihood that they'll retain their new habit for a year or more is around 80 percent.

But what about those who try to change two or more behaviors at once? In them, he asserts, success rates drop as low as 20 percent.

Of course, there's nothing new in the idea that focusing on less helps you achieve more. Experts in all walks of life have recognized it for years. As Guelph University psychology professor Ian Newby-Clark explains:

"Habits are highly ingrained behaviors. They are almost automatic. Changing one habit is hard enough. Trying to change more than one at a time is often a recipe for disaster. So, despite the occasional example to the contrary, my advice is to focus on one habit at a time."

Here's the only problem: In the world of fitness, we still haven't caught on. So **when people decide they want to get into shape, they feel as if they have to do everything at once.** Join the gym, check. Buy some new running shoes, check. Set the alarm for 4:30am, check. Cut out all the junk food, check. Eat more broccoli, check.

They mentally prepare themselves for an all-out assault on fitness and, after a few short days or weeks... *splat!*

Maybe this is why so many people who lose weight put it all back on. Instead of making fitness and weight loss a long-term, sustainable practice, they made it a short-term, inconvenient project. But surely, if someone hires a fitness trainer, the trainer will help prevent this problem. Right?

Unfortunately, some fitness trainers aren't too great at helping their clients prioritize and build from where they are. Rather, most of them focus on the top 10 percent of clients who, endowed with superhuman genetic gifts, can juggle dozens of habits right from the start.

The other 90 percent? They give up and head back home to their couches, all of them forgotten by the fitness industry.

"A high percentage of people stop exercising within six months,"\* says Kris Berg, Ed.D., an exercise physiologist at the University of Nebraska. Overwhelmed by the task of trying to build new exercise and nutrition plans into their already overly busy lives, they give up.

## Habits for Life

Fortunately, there's a small segment of the fitness industry doing things differently. These fitness professionals (and their clients) realize that harnessing the power of less can be accomplished through something called "habit based coaching." **Instead of counting calories, trying to follow rigid meal plans, and trying to adopt the perfect exercise program from day one, habit based coaching starts with a simple daily practice.**

Based on your starting point, that practice might be to go for a 15-minute walk every day. It might be to take fish oil and a multivitamin each day. It might be to start the day with breakfast. (Of course, these practices can be scaled up or down).

Then, every two weeks, once the previous practice has become a habit, you can add another one. Each habit builds on the last until 6 or 12 months later, you've been transformed. And not just physically.

By using the one habit at a time approach, you don't just lose fat. You also internalize a new way of being and that lasts longer than willpower or discipline, which are both finite resources.

As just one example, at Precision Nutrition, we've put habit or practice-based coaching to work in our Lean Eating coaching program, which has been called the largest body transformation project in the world. To date, nearly 10,000 clients have lost over 200,000 pounds — one simple practice at a time.

What we're proudest of is the fact that our clients do what we ask them to do a whopping 75 percent of the time. This high compliance rate is a testament to the effectiveness of simplifying the health and fitness process. Admittedly, at first this feels too slow to many clients. They come in expecting pain, misery, and impossible sacrifice. But none of that is necessary. In fact, this approach is untenable if you want to maintain life-long leanness, health, and fitness. And isn't that what we all want?

## Following Through

So, how can you use the principles of habit-based coaching to get in shape yourself? Or to help friends, family or clients? Here are a few examples:

- **Start small.** First, when it comes to making any kind of lifestyle change, it's best to start small and build. Begin by choosing one practice to follow. It could be drinking 8 cups of water each day. Sleeping 8 hours each night. Or exercise 30 minutes each day. Just be sure to choose only one and follow it for 2 weeks before adding any new habits.
- **Make things clear and measurable.** Next, make sure the practice is clear and measurable. "Eat more veggies" isn't that useful. "Eat 1 fist-sized portion of vegetables with each meal" is much better. At the end of each day you can know for sure if you did it or not.
- **Gain confidence first.** Finally, make the practice something you (or your client) feels confident they can do every day. Even if the habit sounds small, if it's not something that inspires confidence, it's not a great practice to begin with.

One recommended practice could be "Eat five fist-sized servings of vegetables each day." This practice is clear and easy to measure. Either you ate your five servings (or more) or you didn't. Yet is it truly a small habit? That depends.

For some people, the ones who can't wait for their weekly organic produce delivery, it is almost laughably small. For others, it's a just-right challenge, the kick in the pants they need to make an improvement that's not too hard for them to make.

But for others, those who have trouble *identifying* a fresh vegetable much less preparing it, the habit may be too difficult. And that presents the perfect opportunity to shrink the task.

If five servings of vegetables a day is too ambitious a goal, you might aim for two servings a day until that feels like a do-able challenge. We can stretch the practice to five servings later.

Of course, you'll sometimes have to scale it back until the habit seems ridiculously small. You might even wonder how it could ever produce any meaningful change.

The answer is it might not, at least today. But build on the small change, and you'll be amazed at what can be accomplished over a few months. Even more, you'll be surprised at how sustainable these new practices become.

In the end, treat your new health and fitness program like you might approach learning to juggle. Sure, you might not run off to join the circus. But you'll end up with the strength, energy, and balance of a circus performer. And that's an achievement most of us can get behind.

*Learn more at [simpleagain.com](http://simpleagain.com)*