
Habit Myths Dictionary

Each entry is something you may have heard many times, followed by what the research actually shows. Each label applies only to the sentence just before it, and matches the label in the chapter.

“It takes 21 days to form a habit.” The number comes from a 1960 self-help book about getting used to a new face after plastic surgery. It takes 21 days to form a habit (■ ■ ■ **Unproven**). New health habits usually take about two months or more to become automatic, with very wide variation between people (■ ■ ■ **Moderate evidence**). Chapter 4.

“Miss one day and you lose everything.” Missing one occasion doesn’t noticeably slow habit formation (■ ■ ■ **Debated**). Don’t count streaks; don’t miss twice in a row. Chapters 4, 12.

“I’ve run out of willpower today.” “Willpower drains with use” is a reliable effect (■ ■ ■ **Debated**): two large replications found almost no effect. Tiredness is real. Chapter 3.

“Disciplined people are better at resisting temptation.” People with high self-control experience weaker desires, less conflict and resist less often, though they have desires just as often (■ ■ ■ **Debated**). They arrange things so they have to resist less. Chapters 3, 11.

“New Year’s resolutions are a waste of time.” People who make a specific New Year’s resolution are far more likely to succeed than people who only want to change (■ ■ ■ **Debated**). The problem lies in how the plan is written. Chapter 1.

“You have to wait for New Year to start again.” Landmarks such as the start of a week or month, the end of a holiday or a birthday also

make people pursue goals more, not just New Year's Day (■||| **Debated**). Chapters 2, 13.

"No pain, no gain." Exercising beyond the "can still talk" threshold makes most beginners feel clearly worse (■||| **Debated**), and how pleasant exercise feels during a session predicts later activity (■||| **Debated**). Chapter 6.

"Increase by 10% a week and you won't get injured." The 10% rule helps new runners get injured less (■||| **Unproven**). Chapter 6.

"Diet X beats all the others." Named diets produce much the same weight loss after 12 months (■||| **Moderate evidence**). The best diet is the one you can keep following. Chapter 7.

"Weigh yourself every day and the weight will come off." Just weighing yourself (with nothing else) is enough to lose weight (■||| **Unproven**). Adding self-weighing to a behaviour-change programme helps people lose more weight (■||| **Moderate evidence**). Chapter 7.

"If you try not to think about it, you'll forget it." Trying to push a thought out of your mind can make it come back more often afterwards (■||| **Debated**). Give the old cue a new action instead. Chapter 8.

"A dopamine detox resets your brain." "Dopamine detox" lowers or resets the brain's dopamine (■||| **Unproven**). Its useful part is cutting down on stimulating cues. Chapter 8.

"Good sleep hygiene is enough to cure insomnia." For chronic insomnia, cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) is the first-line treatment (■||| **Strong evidence**); sleep hygiene on its own isn't enough. Chapter 9.

"A 30-day challenge will change your habits." Short-term incentive programmes increase gym visits while they run, but rarely keep working after they end (■||| **Moderate evidence**). Chapter 11.

"You have to be hard on yourself to try harder." Self-compassion after a failure increases the motivation to correct mistakes and improve (■||| **Debated**). Chapter 12.