

The Secrets to Behaviour Change

Learn how to build habits that stick
from a leading doctor of behaviour
change

📌 **Dr Louise Schofield**



PREKURE™



DR Louise Schofield, PREKURE CEO and co-founder with a PhD in behaviour change, knows from first hand experience just how hard behaviour change can be, particularly health and lifestyle related behaviour. Read on as she shares her secrets to building habits that stick.

At PREKURE we believe in keeping at the cutting edge and using evidence based science to live a happier, healthier life. Whether you are trying to change your own behaviour or working with clients to change theirs, there are seven cardinal rules that will make your efforts more effective and ultimately more sustainable. This brief guide to behaviour change is an example of the types of resources we will arm you with in our Health Coaching Certificate.

Behaviour change is not a linear process. We don't wake up one day and decide to do something and then just do it, indefinitely without faltering or failing. Wouldn't it be nice if that were the case? Well, if it were, there would be no room or need for Health Coaches but there is. The reality is that behaviour change is difficult and messy and we can do our best to make it less so by following seven key rules. Why are these rules and not suggestions you ask? Well, when we set out to change our behaviour (whatever that might be) and make new habits stick, the going will inevitably get tough and we will feel the desire to waiver. We might start to look towards instant gratification or forget why we are putting ourselves through this in the first place. The rules will help us stay the course, weather the storm and make those habits stick.

First, let's consider how habits are formed in the first place. Have you ever found yourself engaging in a behaviour before you have even thought about it? That's a habit. It's something we do with very little thought or consideration. This can be great in certain situations but in others quite harmful to our health. For example, during a bout of boredom scrolling on your phone you find that a muffin has miraculously appeared in your hand and now you are munching away. How did this happen? Well, for a habit to form we need three things: a cue or trigger, a routine and a reward. Let's start with the cue. The cue is the thing that kicks the habit off, in this example the cue would be boredom. Next we have the routine, this can be physical, mental or emotional. In this example the routine is scrolling and eating. Finally, we have a reward. The reward helps your brain figure out whether or not this particular loop is worth remembering in the future. In this example the reward comes from the dopamine secreted from engaging with your phone and eating the sugary muffin.

Once we break a habit into its component parts, we can fiddle with the mechanism. By learning to observe cues and rewards, we can change routines and, ultimately, behaviour. That's all good and well but what exactly do we do if we want to replace these habits with better ones that will hold our health in good stead for many years to come? It's a simple formula really but the challenge is in executing it every day. Here are the seven rules of behaviour change to help you make healthy habits stick! You can always invert these rules to kick unhelpful habits to the curb.



The 7 Rules of Behaviour Change



1 Know your WHY

What is the real reason you want to change this behaviour? Taking some time to reflect on your why is a powerful way to understand how committed you are to making the changes. Your why will also serve as a lighthouse, a beacon of promise and motivation on the days when you just don't think you can do it. In behaviour change this is often known as the motivation or the thing that keeps you engaged in a behaviour.

A powerful tool you can use to get to the bottom of this (for yourself or your clients) is to ask why at least five times. Picture this scenario, you have set your goal, you know where you are going and what you need to do to get there, but why are you going there? You say you want to lose 5kgs or quit eating sugar. Ask yourself why once and jot down the response. Now, ask yourself why again and jot down the response. There is no judgement here, just be curious and continue to ask yourself why until you get to the real reason that it is driving you to change your behaviour. Now, write your why down on a sticky note or in your phone and look back at it whenever you feel old behaviours creeping in.

2 Make it as FUN as possible

It's far easier to do the things you love (or at the very least like) than the things you hate. When you set out to change your behaviour make sure you take some time to reflect on what you enjoy or how you can make a behaviour fun. If you have read the book 'Atomic Habits' you will have come across the concept 'make it attractive'. Habits are more attractive to us when they are associated with positive feelings.

For example, if you love running then this habit is fun for you and you will find sticking to it easy. But, if running isn't for you and you are perpetually in a cycle of hyping yourself up to engage in an activity you don't really want to, you will find making this into a habit rather challenging. You might also make it fun by stacking it with another behaviour that you really enjoy. For example, if you want to get into cold water swimming because you've read about the benefits, but you can't stand the cold then maybe after your morning swim you meet your friend for a coffee at a local cafe. By stacking habits like this you have given your brain something to look forward to, it knows that once you have achieved this challenge you get to do something enjoyable.

3 Be POSITIVE with yourself

It's really easy to let doubt and negative thoughts creep in when we are trying to change our behaviours. The old saboteur seems to pipe up and tell us all the reasons we can't achieve the goals we've set for ourselves and kick old, unhelpful habits and behaviours to the curb. A great mantra to use when you feel that negativity rear its head is to remind yourself how you would talk to a friend or loved one if they were in the same situation. Would you bash them and tell them to just tough it out and get on with it or would you offer some words of encouragement and support. Probably the latter, right? And that's probably exactly what you need in that moment, some positivity. Remember, the carrot works better than the stick so rather than telling yourself about the punishment or negative consequences if you don't engage in a behaviour, focus on the great stuff (and maybe a reward) if you do.

Here at PREKURE we believe that being curious about why we veered away from our behaviour change is more important than the veering off itself. Sure, you slipped up but why did that happen and what could you do to prevent it next time? Is it possible that the approach you are taking is maybe not the right one for you? By reframing the way we think about our behaviour change journey it is easier to be positive and proactive when things don't go to plan. When you falter,

try using the phrase, 'That's alright, next time I will...' We can always be 1% better and if we get stuck in what we haven't done we fail to see what we can do.



We are all guilty of overestimating health or lifestyle-related changes that we can achieve in the short term — but we often grossly underestimate what we are capable of in the longer term.

— *Dr Louise Schofield*

4 Make it as EASY as possible

At PREKURE you will hear us talk about making the healthy choice the easy choice. If you want to eat better, start by buying better food and maybe preparing ahead of time. That way when you come home after a long day of work, it doesn't take much extra effort to throw together a healthy dinner. For nutrition and exercise it is a good idea to have a couple of 'go to' options. This is useful for two reasons. First, it takes all the thought and worry out of the equation. Instead of thinking about what you will eat and how you will get your exercise in, you know that you will have one of five or six meals that you eat often and either go for a walk or attend a group fitness class. Less thought, less stress, more action. Second, when you are tired (which you will be from time to time, it's a part of life) you will know what those quick options are and will reach for those rather than take out. Steve Jobs wore the same outfit everyday so that he could use his mental capacity to focus on more important things. You can do this too by keeping it simple and making it as easy as possible for yourself.

Inversely you want to make the unhealthy choice the difficult choice. That means if you're trying to eat healthier, clear out those chips and choccy biscuits, so when your willpower is at a low point, you can't just reach in and grab the junk food—you have to get up and drive to the shops... which is much less likely to happen!

5 Involve other PEOPLE

When you've got support, you don't have to rely on just your own willpower. Suddenly you are part of a team, a group with a shared purpose and mission. Once we have spoken our goals and intentions out loud to others, we are locked in and an element of accountability creeps in. This is why many people enjoy group fitness classes, when you don't show up your friends will call you out and ask you where you were. This is also the power of a Health Coach. They help provide accountability to ensure you stick to your goals and do what you said you would. Maybe you and your partner or flatmate want to hold one another accountable. How do you do this? Well, start by asking them what they will do. Then drill down to the details and get clarity on when, how, where, with who they will do this thing. Let's consider an example, your flatmate says that they want to exercise more. Feels like a bit of a vague goal doesn't it? You can help them along the way by asking them, "What does exercising more look like for them?". They might respond that they want to go for a walk four times a week. You could then ask when they will do it, how long they will do it for, where they will go and who they will do it with. The 'who' might be where you come in. Involving other people helps us stick to habits so when you are considering kickstarting a new habit, you may want to ask yourself how you can involve others.

6 Make it a HABIT

There has been research that suggests that we act before we are even conscious of what we are doing 40% of the time [1]. That means that almost half of the things you do everyday are habitual, they are things you have done over and over and over again. That's why it is important to try and get into a routine as quickly as possible. When we do things repetitively we build habits and it becomes easier. For example, exercise at the same time everyday or eat the same meal for breakfast on weekdays. This isn't boring, it is effective.

Science tells us that there are three main principles when it comes to changing habitual behaviours. First, create a window of opportunity that allows you to derail existing habits and set new intentions in place. Yep, your grandmother was right when she told you to take a deep breath before doing anything. This moment of pause will allow you time to think "do I really want this glass of wine or am I just drinking it because it is 5pm on a Friday night and that's what I do". In some cases you can remove triggers all together, if you are trying to eat healthier and others in your household still eat junk foods then put those foods out of sight. This means when a trigger pops up and you go looking for that food, there is time for you to reflect before finding it. It also means (if the food itself is

the trigger) that it is out of sight. You know what they say, out of sight out of mind. Second, remember repetition is key. Research shows that it can take anywhere between 15 and 254 days to form a new habit [1]. Third, stack habits together by using what scientists call stable context cues. This is just a fancy way of saying, stack a new desired habit on top of an existing well formed habit. A classic example is brushing our teeth. Most of us do this in the morning and evening with little thought, it is simply part of our daily routine. Let's say you wanted to start practising gratitude for 10 minutes each day, brushing your teeth becomes your cue and so the routine is 'stacked'.



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7 Track & measure your PROGRESS

If we can't see the reward in a behaviour, our brains tend to find it difficult to stay engaged. Tracking and measuring progress is an important part of making behaviours stick because it gives us tangible evidence that all our hard work has been rewarded. There are obviously many ways you can do this depending on the behaviour you are trying to instil. One thing you can do is use a habit tracker (this helps with forming habits too). You could write down your behaviour everyday in your diary or calendar and each time you achieve it, you can tick it off. Another way you could do this is by measuring something at the beginning of your efforts and then again at set time points. For example, your goal might be to lose 5kgs in three months. Before you begin on your journey you could weigh yourself, then you weigh yourself at the end to see how you have progressed.

Now that you know the secrets to lasting and sustainable behaviour change it's worth considering which new goals you will trial these out with. Remember to create SMART goals that are: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based. Open-ended goals don't go down very well because the reward is too far away. Setting smaller, attainable goals will help keep you motivated and engaged in sustained behaviour change.

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Prevention is Cure. Lifestyle is Medicine.

PREKURE is a health education & training provider championing a Lifestyle Medicine Movement. Our society spends billions on sickness and very little on health. It's time we changed our 'medicine'. We see a new world of medicine as preventative, customer-centric and future-focussed. One where people thrive, not just survive.

Are you with us?

The current health system is failing sufferers of chronic disease – we need passionate people to help solve the problem. By studying with us you can help yourself and others to make the critical lifestyle changes required to dramatically improve health and wellbeing.

Do you want to develop an in-depth understanding of the latest science and evidence in behaviour change?

In our PK101: Behaviour as Medicine short course, you will learn both the art and science of coaching and behaviour change, giving you the practical knowledge to help your clients or patients make sustainable behavioural changes. Learn all about motivational interviewing and how habits are formed, and discover the latest techniques from the field of positive psychology.

This course arms you with everything you need to know in the area of behaviour and medicine so you can really make a difference.

Together we can change medicine for good. Learn more at prekure.com



I am enjoying the course so much, in fact, I am fizzing with excitement. I feel I will become more balanced, self-aware and thoughtful using the skills in this course.

— Janet, PK101 Student





PK101 *The Secrets to Behaviour Change*
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