

 **Goals** Exercise n/a Client No

Habit Tracker

Habits are learned context-behavior associations that develop through the repetition of a given behavior in a given context (Mazar & Wood, 2018). As proverbial creatures of habit, approximately 45% of our everyday behaviors are repeated in the same context and location (Neal, Wood, & Quinn, 2006). Cued by specific circumstances and trigger events, habits are formed through regular repetition, happen primarily outside of conscious awareness, and play a key role in supporting long-lasting changes in behavior (Stawarz, Cox, & Blandford, 2014).

While the number of repetitions required to reach automaticity varies depending on the complexity of specific behaviors, the actions we repeat most often become etched into our neural pathways (Chen et al., 2020). When a behavior becomes automatic and performed with minimum conscious awareness or intent, a new habit is established. Habit formation promotes both cognitive economy and performance efficiency, which, in turn, allow for the conservation of self-regulatory strength (Duhigg, 2012).

Self-tracking plays an important role in the development of habits. A habit tracker is a tool used to record desired behaviors and provides a visual reminder that supports the repetition and maintenance of new behaviors (Stawarz, Cox, & Blandford, 2014). In other words, it is an effective way to measure whether a habit has been completed. According to Clear (2018), habit tracking is intrinsically motivating, satisfying, and provides clear evidence of one's progress and growth. As writer and philosopher, Will Durant, stated, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients monitor and record the daily use of desired behaviors through the practice of habit tracking.



Advice

- Clients should not attempt to change too many behaviors at the same time. An over-ambitious habit tracker can feel like a burden because it may introduce too many habits. Initially, tracking should be limited to five important habits: it is better to track one habit consistently than to track ten sporadically. Simplicity is the key. If necessary, clients can select just one simple habit to track and do it well before moving on to another.
- It is beneficial to pair an existing and reliable 'anchor' habit with a new one. For instance, clients might pair flossing their teeth (new habit) with brushing their teeth (existing anchor habit). In this example, brushing one's teeth becomes a trigger to perform the new action of flossing. It is also easier to maintain the behavior because it is repeated in a specific context.
- Clients should try to use the habit tracker immediately after the habit occurs: the completion of the habit should be the cue to record it.
- Patience and consistency are integral to successful habit tracking. While small changes might appear to make little to no effect on the bigger picture, habits are the foundation blocks of change. Forming a habit will inevitably take longer for some clients and less for others; there is no set rule to how long it takes to acquire positive habits and promote change. While it is more common to select daily habits, clients may also track habits that occur a few times a week, such as housework or exercise.
- Advise clients to place the habit tracker somewhere it can be viewed and completed with ease every day, for instance, on the fridge, bedside table, in a workspace. The important thing is that they can complete the tracker as easily as possible; any location that is obvious and significant will make this easier to remember.
- New habits should be simplified until each action takes less than five minutes to complete. A client who wishes to run a marathon knows that to do so, one must be fit and healthy. To be fit and healthy, one must first exercise, and before one can exercise, one must be wearing suitable workout clothes. In this case, the five-minute habit could simply be changing into gym gear and running for five minutes. Think standardization before optimization - a habit must first exist before it is improved.
- Habits and their cues are often connected to our physical and social environment. The sight of the television when you get home from work, for instance, might be a cue to sit down on the sofa and do nothing for the rest of the evening. As such, it may be beneficial for clients to change their surroundings or routines to accommodate the formation of a new habit. Rather than sitting down upon returning home, one might instead change into workout clothes and exercise immediately after work, thereby delaying the cue to sit down and relax.
- The process of habit tracking will inevitably falter at some point, and, on such occasions, clients must return to practicing and tracking habits as quickly as possible. If, for any reason, one day is missed, there should be a clear focus on completing it the following day. It is not the end of the world to miss out on one workout, but it is important not to miss two in a row.



- Clients should record each habit immediately after each behavior has occurred, as the cue to track and record it is the completion of the habit itself.
- A habit tracker does not have to be static. Rather, it should be viewed as a flexible entity that can be reviewed and adjusted when needed.

References

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Habit Tracker

Step 1: Understanding habits and habit tracking

Habits are routines or behaviors that are performed regularly and, in many cases, automatically. Almost every habit - both good and bad - is the result of many small choices that have been made over a lifetime.

A habit tracker is a simple way to record when you have completed a habit, and it is an effective way to build new habits, continue to practice existing good habits, and break bad habits. Small changes in our actions can be seen as unimportant because it might not be immediately obvious how they contribute to the bigger picture or end goal. For example, studying a new language for an hour does not mean that you are bilingual, yet you are choosing to build a new and positive habit that will bring you closer to reaching that goal. Habit tracking is about noticing the daily processes you follow and recording your actions at the moment rather than focusing solely on the result.

Step 2: Identify habits to track

Identifying the habits that you wish to include in your tracker is an entirely personal choice. However, it is better to track a small number of habits than to become overwhelmed by tracking too many. In this step, you will select up to five habits you wish to track. A list of commonly tracked habits can be found in Appendix C, which may be a source of inspiration as you consider the habits you wish to track.

First, take some time to think about the habits you would like to track. Start small, be specific, and initially aim to track habits that take less than five minutes to complete. In doing so, you can introduce a new routine without creating too much disorder to your current day-to-day activities. Most habits can be scaled down to five-minutes. For instance, "Read before bed every night" can be scaled down to "Read one page before bed every night" - most people can meditate for five minutes or read one page of a book.

As you identify the habits you wish to track, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can it be done regularly (every day, if possible)?
2. Does it push your abilities but is still manageable?
3. Will it improve your physical health, mental health, finances, or relationships?
4. Does it encourage play and creativity?

Take a look at the habit tracker template provided in Appendix A. Put a circle around the month you would like to start building your habit. Next, write up to five habits in the first column of the habit tracker. Formulate your habits in such a way that they represent clear actions, such as reading, weightlifting, and writing in my journal. Preferably, frame them as actions to take, rather than actions to avoid. Thus, rather than saying "not forgetting to floss my teeth," frame your habit as "flossing my teeth."

You may wish to increase the number of habits you track as you become more familiar with the process.



Step 3: Start tracking

Now that you have identified the habits you wish to track, it is time to start tracking. The more often you complete each habit, the stronger and more automatic it will become. Habit tracking aims to check on the progress by completing the habit and filling in the tracker every day.

The simplest way to complete the habit tracker is to place an X next to each day when a habit has been completed. Leave the space blank if you did not complete the activity.

Each time you use your habit tracker, you are getting immediate feedback that you are making progress and are on the right track. As time passes, your tracker will provide an accurate record of your habits, and seeing the progress you make each day will encourage you to keep going so that the chain of crosses is not broken.



Appendix C: Common habits to track

- journal two sentences
- sketch in my notebook for five minutes
- take supplements
- have some 'me time'
- walk dog two blocks
- get to work on time
- do the recycling
- eat breakfast
- drink a glass of water first thing in the morning
- no biting nails
- do the dishes
- wash face before bed
- listen to a podcast
- practice yoga for 2 minutes
- write three positive things about today
- drink 8 glasses of water
- watch a TED Talk
- read one page of a book
- save money
- meditate for one minute
- do one push up
- no screens after 9 pm
- stretch for five minutes
- be creative
- write one thing I'm grateful for today
- make your bed as soon as you wake up
- wake up by [TIME]
- go to bed by [TIME]
- floss teeth
- eat five pieces of fruit
- play [INSTRUMENT]
- prioritize to-do list
- say "I love you" at least once
- do the dishes
- take a walk outside
- get in touch with a loved one
- walk the dog