

Reward Yourself: Celebrating Behavior Change

Changing unhealthy behaviors is one of life's greatest challenges. Let's face it, engaging in dangerous behaviors such as smoking, overeating and avoiding exercise give us some type of short-term pleasure. Conversely, giving up such behavior can be painful. That's why we need to reward ourselves for each small step, especially at the start of the process.

Rewards keep you on a new path

If used correctly, rewards stimulate a positive cycle of change. We all get stuck in mental ruts. What we're trying to do in the process of behavior change is to break out of that rut. One way to do that is to create new paths or habits through a system of rewards. When you feel good once, it's easier to feel good the next time. Think of rewards as fuel to keep you on a new path.

When we celebrate behavior change with rewards, we're recognizing achievement, motivating ourselves to continue, and building self-esteem. This last part is key to maintaining change as self-esteem gives us the courage to keep moving forward and to keep trying. Self-esteem can counter "low" feelings that may accompany a backslide into bad habits.

Make rewards meaningful

The first rule of rewards is that they should make you feel good. They should have value. And they should be immediate—in other words, when we achieve a determined goal, big or small, we get the reward that matches. Generally, there are two types of rewards:

- **extrinsic**—coming from the outside, such as buying a CD, going to a spa, getting praise from others
- **intrinsic**—the reward is in how the action makes us feel: proud, content, victorious

Though rewards that change our inner life (intrinsic) are more important in the long run, extrinsic rewards serve as important pats-on-the-back on the road to change.

Building rewards into behavior change

As with the change process itself, rewards should start small and end big. Plan for a variety of short-range, mid-range, long-range and maintenance rewards along the way. Don't neglect this last stage of behavior change because the ultimate goal is to make the new behavior a habit.

Let's say you want to lose 50 pounds through exercise. Here's what your reward program might look like:

- A short-range goal would be a daily 45-minute walk; the matching reward, a guilt-free half hour of TV.
- A mid-range goal would be a month of daily exercise; the matching mid-range reward, a trip to a spa for a day of indulgence.

- When you reach your weight goal, it's time for a long-range reward; take a long-dreamed of trip or buy a new wardrobe.
- Maintenance rewards follow a similar path. Reward yourself at determined intervals for maintaining an exercise program.

Don't neglect the intrinsic rewards inherent with an achievement. You lost weight, and now you feel good and look better. Write down how you feel, treasure the positive experience, connect it to the behavior change.

Tips for rewards

- Reward the positives but don't punish slip-ups.
- When rewarding someone else, get to know what they value. People are motivated by different things—money, praise, beauty. Rewards need to have value to the recipient to be effective.
- Celebrate small accomplishments.
- Let other people know about your successes.
- Don't over-reward. Over-rewarding, like over-praising, can backfire. If someone raves about a mediocre accomplishment, you feel patronized and manipulated. Make the reward match the effort/output.
- Celebrate with others, especially a mentor.
- Celebrate the positive hidden within certain negatives. Writers often celebrate their first rejection letter. What they're really celebrating is the risk they took in creating something and congratulating themselves for taking the first step to getting published.
- Create a written and signed contract with yourself in which you outline the behavior changes and rewards.
- Re-evaluate your goals and rewards. If they don't work, change them.
- Reduce rewards as the new behavior becomes a habit, while keeping a few maintenance rewards in line.

Sources: *1001 Ways to Reward Employees* by Bob Nelson, Workman Publishing, 2005; *Psychological Self-Help* by Dr. Clayton E. Tucker-Ladd, 2004, <http://mentalhelp.net/psyhelp/>; "Peak Performance, Self Esteem, and Self Efficacy" by Ernesto A. Randolfi, PhD, Optimal Health Concepts, www.imt.net/~randolfi/esteem.html

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