

Small Steps for

Staying Positive



Putting an optimistic spin on negative thoughts may make a big difference. These tiny tweaks can help you get started.

Many people have a tendency to think about healthy behaviors in black-and-white extremes: chocolate is bad, carrots are good; missing a few daily walks means you've fallen off the wagon; a scale that won't budge means your health is spiraling out of control. This distorted thinking pattern may harm your efforts to improve your health because small setbacks may cause you to feel defeated, down and ready to give up. Here are some tips for keeping a positive long-view perspective.

Step #1

Catch yourself when you use words like “always,” “must” or “never.”

Imperatives like this set impossible standards—and set you up for failure when you (inevitably) don't live up to them. Hearing yourself say words like “must” or “never” and recognizing this sort of all-or-nothing thinking is a huge first step to changing it. Recognize that you might not always avoid sweets or take your walk at the exact time you've scheduled it.

Step #2

Replace rigid words with more flexible ones.

Try “sometimes,” “most of the time,” “as often as I can” or “during the week.” The more you practice, the easier it will be.

Step #3

Rewrite your scripts.

If you find yourself vowing things like “I will never eat pizza again,” soften the script. Try something like this: “I'll try to choose alternatives to pizza most of the time, but when I do have some, I'll just have one slice and enjoy it.”

Step #4

Don't beat yourself up.

Beyond all-or-nothing thinking, your internal thoughts about yourself can have a huge impact on your attempts at behavior change. If you treat yourself like a failure, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you work to replace negative thoughts with positive counter thoughts, you can turn a minor setback into a small victory. For example, instead of getting upset over a diet slipup, focus on how good you feel after a healthy meal and an after-dinner walk.

Step #5

Practice looking at the bright side.

One strategy for keeping an optimistic outlook is anticipating potential problems and thinking ahead about how you might reframe the negative thoughts that automatically bubble up. Right now, think of three bumps in the road that may get in the way of improving your health. Now, transform the negative attitudes you anticipate into positive, can-do statements. For each obstacle you anticipate, write down: 1) the potential problem, 2) the typical negative thought and 3) a positive counter thought.