

Guidebook

Health Challenge

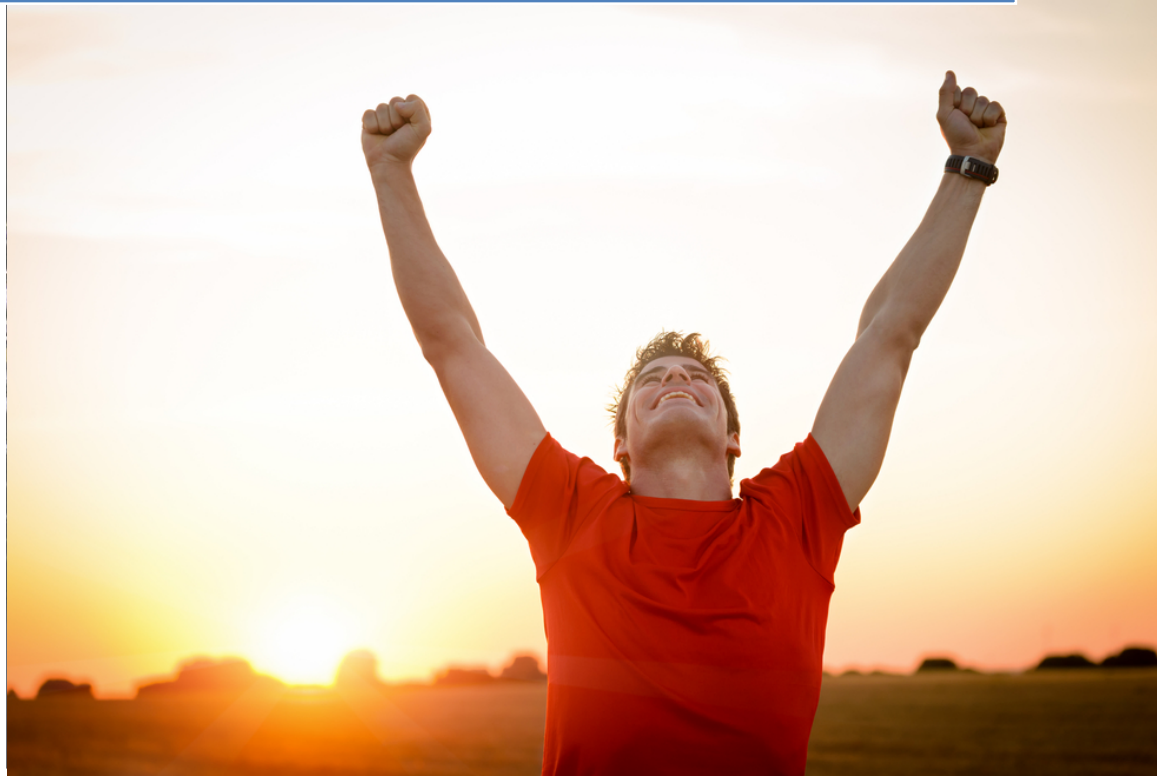


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Tracking Variables

Servings of Fruit/Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are the two most important food groups for a healthy diet. They are the primary source of many of the vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients that your body requires. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends consumption of 5 to 13 servings of fruits and vegetables each day, which is an equivalent of about 2.5 to 6.5 cups. Ideally, these servings should come from a wide variety of different foods in order to maximize the number of nutrients. You can find a guideline of how much makes up a serving [here](#) or [here](#).

Sweets

While delicious, sweets – candy, cakes, cookies, pies, doughnuts, etc. – are often some of the largest contributors to extra calories in our diets and typically have little nutritional value. Because they are calorie dense (a lot of calories in a small amount of food), they also don't keep us full for very long and may cause us to end up eating even more. While it isn't necessarily to eliminate them completely, and I never would, it's best to limit sweets and dessert to only occasional treats.

Meals Cooked

Cooking meals at home has many, many health benefits. Aside from knowing exactly what goes into your food, it also means that you can use less unhealthy extras like butter, sugar, and oil, and you'll be more likely to eat reasonably sized portions. Even something as simple as a sandwich can have hundreds of extra calories if bought in a restaurant than if you'd made an equivalent yourself at home.

Glasses of Water

Water is critically important for the nearly every aspect of the body's ability to function. Water helps to regulate your body temperature, removes waste, and lubricates your joints. Even minor dehydration can lead to tiredness, fatigue, muscle cramps, reduced concentration, and slower response times. Meanwhile, drinking enough water will lead to healthier skin, teeth, bones, joints, digestive systems, and minds. Being adequately hydrated can also help with weight loss and muscle gain. Most people have been told they should drink about 8 8-oz glasses of water a day, and that's the standard we've chosen to use here. However, actual water requirements will vary based on size and activity level of a person – plus the temperature outside! If you're adequately hydrated, your urine should be a very pale yellow color (contrary to popular belief, it does not need to be clear.) If you notice anything darker, you are probably dehydrated and should drink more.

Steps

The more you move, the healthier you'll be! And putting extra effort into getting steps is even more important for people like us, who spend most of our day sitting at a desk. The American Heart Association recommends a minimum of 10,000 steps per day, as well as a minimum of 250 steps per hour. While we are only measuring total steps, it's good to think about trying to get up every so often and avoid sitting for too long at a time.

Time Spent Exercising

Just like steps, exercising regularly will contribute to your overall health and wellbeing. The American Heart Association recommends a minimum of 150 minutes (or 2.5 hours) or moderate exercise per week. For our challenge, any conscious effort to participate in physical activity counts as exercise. Playing sports, lifting weights, doing sit-ups, going for a run, or even just heading out for a casual stroll around the block can all count as exercise. However, for those of us who have to hike in from our cars each day at work, you may NOT count that walk as exercise. It will go toward your step count, though, so you'll still get credit.

Work Outs per Week

Work outs per week is very similar to time spent exercising, but we're measuring it separately because it's important to get active on more than just one or two days. The American Heart Association recommends five days a week (thirty minutes a day). When counting workouts, you may count more than one per day – but only if you are doing two separate things. If you went to two yoga classes, that could only count as one workout. But if you went to a yoga class and then spent 20 minutes biking, that could count as two. If you work out every day, make sure to vary the activities so that your body gets a little rest! Otherwise, you may get overuse or repetitive motion injuries.

Reflection Time

What is reflection time you ask? Reflection time can be a wide variety of things. Taking time to consciously be alone with yourself and relaxing is the main goal. This can be done with meditation, silent time, taking time to observe your accomplishments for the day... whatever helps you unwind. There are many benefits that comes with reflection time including as reduction of stress levels, better sleep, improved brain function, and a better immune system just to name a few! The amount of time taken for reflection is completely up to you. If you're interested, you can check out YouTube for self-guided mediation ideas.

Acts of Self Care

Many of us live very busy lives and sometimes we may forget to take care of ourselves. This category is created with you in mind! Self-care is any act of helping yourself be a better you. This is a free pass to be selfish! How can you help others and be of service without taking care of yourself? So go get that massage! Have a spa day! Take a nap! Watch your favorite movie!

Sleep

Sleep is probably the single most important contributor to overall health. Lack of sufficient sleep can lead to increased stress, decreased brain function and concentration, irritability, memory loss, poor immune response, weight gain, and, over time, increases risk for heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. The average adult needs 6-8 hours a sleep of day, but only you know what's right for you. That's why, for this category, we have asked you to set a sleep goal based on the number of hours you believe you require. Please be honest with yourself!

Body Fat Percentage

While weight is certainly not a direct indicator of health, there are many diseases that are positively associated with obesity, including coronary heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. Being at a healthy body fat percentage will reduce your risk for these, as well as their indicators – high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high blood sugar, and inflammation. For this challenge, we are choosing to measure body

fat percentage as it is the most accurate way of determining health. BMI, which is just a ratio of weight to height, is a horribly inaccurate measurement that typically deems bodybuilders morbidly obese. Body fat percentage can be difficult to measure, so we will use the calculator at the following [link](#). This calculator only requires the use of a tape measure, and the page also includes information what your percentage should be. If you have an electrical impedance scale or body fat calipers you are welcome to use those as well, but please make sure your method of measurement is consistent. We will take measurements twice – at the beginning of the challenge and at the end.

Blood Pressure

Blood pressure is often an early indicator for risk of heart disease. You can measure your blood pressure quickly and easily at nearly any pharmacy, including grocery store pharmacies. Your blood pressure will consist of two readings – systolic (the upper number) and diastolic (the lower number); both must be within the healthy range in order to be considered healthy (120/80 or lower). Similarly to body fat percentage, a healthy blood pressure will be awarded full points at the beginning of the challenge. Otherwise, you will receive points based on the range you achieve at the end. You can lower your blood pressure by losing body fat, exercising regularly, eating a healthy diet, reducing dietary sodium, limiting alcohol consumption, quitting smoking, cutting back on caffeine, and/or reducing stress.

Resting Heart Rate

Your resting heart rate is a good indicator of overall heart health; it tells you how fast your heart needs to pump to provide the lowest amount of blood necessary to sustain minimal activity. A typical resting heart rate for an adult is 60 to 100, but lower is better and endurance athletes will often have resting heart rates in the low 40s. Current research suggests that anything over 70 can be a health risk. You should measure your resting heart rate when you are sitting or lying down, and have been for at least a few minutes. A good time can be a few minutes after waking up, before you get out of bed. Place your fingers on the inside of your wrist or elbow or on the side of your neck and count how many heart beats you hear in one minute. You can also count for thirty seconds and then multiply the count by two. Resting heart rate will also be measured twice – at the beginning (for a baseline) and at the end. You can lower your resting heart rate through exercise, stress reduction, or weight loss. Cardiovascular exercise, where you increase your heart rate for an extended period of time, will likely be the most effective.

Tips and Tricks

Let's be honest: making healthy choices all the time is not easy. If it were, everyone would already be doing it. However, it is worth it. Even if you're only able to improve in a few of these categories, you will likely notice a difference in how you feel. And if you're able to improve in all or most of them, that difference will be significant! The following section provides tips and tricks for achieving a healthier lifestyle, based on challenges some of our SMO team members have shared. I hope that you find this information useful in your journey toward a happier, healthier life.

Making Changes

The first and absolute **most** important thing you *must* do if you want to sustain healthier choices is figure out a "why". What's motivating you to want to be healthier? For me, it's a combination of how much better I feel when I make good choices and the joy it brings me when people tell me that I've inspired them to make healthier choices as well. For you, it may be so that you're better able to play with your children or grandchildren. Or it could be because you have family medical history that you'd like to avoid. Whatever the reason, it needs to be good. In my experience, "because I want to lose weight" is not motivating enough. (Trust me, the people who say nothing tastes as good as skinny feels are lying.)

Once you've figured out your "why", you need to determine the "how". Those who are most successful make small, incremental changes one at a time. Start with the low hanging fruit. For example, maybe you choose to take the stairs every day instead of the elevator. Or maybe you decide to stop drinking soda and switch to water. Whatever you choose, stick with that thing until it feels easy and automatic; then pick the next thing. While you can make more than one change at once, I would recommend keeping it to no more than three smallish things. Human beings have limited will power, and if you try to make too many changes at once you will exhaust it and eventually revert back to your old behaviors. If you make just one or two changes at a time, each change is much more likely to stick. Whatever you do, try to avoid making yourself feel deprived. I know from personal experience that those feelings are the start of nothing but trouble.

Health is a journey, and it can be a long one. Don't be afraid to take your time – even small changes are a step in the right direction. The only person you need to compare yourself to is you, so if you're doing better than you were the day or week before, you're doing great! Keep up the good work. 😊

General Nutrition

First things first: I don't believe in diets, and you shouldn't either. A diet is a temporary undertaking, typically at some level of extreme, which starts when you get desperate and ends when you either give up or hit an arbitrary goal. This is not about dieting; this is about making permanent lifestyle changes to improve your overall health.

So if you shouldn't diet, what should you do? Simple. Eat more good stuff and less bad stuff. The good stuff is fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds, lean meats, and whole grains. The bad stuff is refined (white) grains, fatty meats, sweets, and fried foods. Dairy, which you may have noticed is missing from that list, can be considered an in-between. It's not bad for you, so you can eat it at will, but you probably shouldn't go out of your way to eat *more* of it in the name of health. You may also have noticed that whole grains, which are carbs, are on the good list. Yes, it's true; carbs really are good for you if done correctly! In general, the closer something is to its original state (e.g. fresh produce), the better. The more processed (e.g. Twinkies), the more likely it is that you should avoid it.

Now does this mean you can never have the bad stuff? Of course not. Severe restriction diets don't work (see? No diets!). However, it does mean you should eat the bad things in moderation. If you typically eat dessert with dinner, try cutting down to just one or two desserts per week. If you're used to eating a lot of fast food, try making it an occasional treat. For example, I try to only eat fried fast food (like McDonalds) when I'm traveling because it limits the frequency with which I have it, but also sets a specific occasion where I know it will be allowed – guilt free.

Avoid fad diets, cook for yourself as much as possible with real, fresh ingredients, and limit things that come in boxes. If you can manage those three things, you'll be in an excellent place.

General Exercise

It's generally recommended that one include a combination of cardiovascular exercise, resistance training, and stretching in his or her work out routine. There's a lot of advice out there about which form of these things is best, but ultimately the best type of exercise will be one that you enjoy. If you hate running, don't try to run. Eventually you're going to get sick of it and quit. Trying playing a sport or dancing or bicycling instead – anything works so long as you're having fun.

Cardio counts as anything that gets your heart rate up for an extended period of time. Without a heart rate monitor, you can get a general idea of the level of effort you're using based on the pace of your breathing. If you're able to hold a comfortable conversation just like when you're sitting at your desk, whatever you're doing probably doesn't count as cardio. However, being able to get out a sentence or a couple of words at a time is a good range to be in. If you're breathing so fast you can only get out a word at a time or can't talk at all, you're at a level that you shouldn't try to sustain for too long. While useful in interval training, that amount of effort is not ideal for extended periods of time. Generally, it's recommended that you do a form of cardiovascular exercise three times per week.

Resistance training incorporates any form of strength. This can mean lifting weights in the gym, doing bodyweight exercise (like push-ups or planks) at home, or even keeping a resistance band at your desk and doing a few movements while on meetings. It's recommended that you engage in some form of resistance training at least two times per week.

Finally, stretching is a useful tool in reducing risk of injury. You should never try to stretch too hard without having warmed up first, as you may end up causing micro-tears in the muscle fibers. Instead, warm up with dynamic movements (like jumping jacks) and wait for any deep stretching until after your workout when your muscles are warm and more naturally flexy. Stretching should never hurt, so if you find yourself in pain from a stretch back off a little and try again without reaching so far.

In general, while it's a good idea to include all three of these things, no one is perfect. If you're getting in some exercise, that's a good beginning. Start with a realistic understanding of you current level of fitness and then aim to improve from there, wherever it is.

Losing Weight

If your goal is to lose weight, you need to burn more calories than you consume. Technically, you could eat nothing but Twinkies every day and as long as you burned more calories than you ate you would still lose weight (this has actually been done in real life). However, eating nothing but Twinkies is not the best strategy. First of all, Twinkies are not very nutritious and you would end up with some pretty serious deficiencies and feel crappy because of it. But secondly, Twinkies are not very filling and in order to burn more calories than you consumed you'd have to either eat relatively few of them and be very hungry or exercise a ton.

Instead, your best strategy is to eat filling, nutrient-dense foods. The following [website](#) shows what 200 calories of different foods looks like; this is not to imply that you should only eat 200 calories at a time, but rather to provide a visual of which types of foods will be more filling. For most of us, it's intuitive

that three eggs will keep you full for longer than half a Snickers would. In general, proteins and fats take longer to digest and will make you feel more full than carbohydrates. Fiber, however, which is present in many complex carbohydrates (like whole grains and fruit), will also help keep you full.

While counting calories can be a useful tool, it is by no means necessary. If you eat slowly and listen to your body, you should be able to stop eating when you are satisfied – not stuffed – and as long as you are eating the right foods you will naturally eat the right amount. A few tips to curb portion sizes: we tend to eat what we put on our plates, so start with less food. If you still feel hungry once you finish your plate, wait a few minutes for your stomach to catch up, and then get seconds if you feel you still need them. We also tend to eat proportionate to the size of our plates; putting your food on a smaller plate will make you feel like you're eating more, and will ultimately help you eat less. Also, it helps to avoid eating while distracted. Turn off the TV and try not to browse the internet during meal times; these activities turn your attention away from your stomach and often cause us to eat more than we need just because we're distracted.

The widely accepted convention is that weight loss is 80% diet and 20% exercise. While exercise certainly can and does make an impact, many people overestimate the number of calories they burn working out and underestimate the number of calories they consume. Especially if you aren't eating healthily already, it's much easier to significantly reduce the calories you take in than it is to significantly increase the calories you burn. However, adding exercise is still a good idea because it will provide some wiggle room with food. And, of course, exercise contributes to overall health as well.

Exercising More

Many of us are familiar with the intention to exercise more. Most of us have probably said "I need to get in better shape," or "I'm going to start running," or "I'm totally going to use this gym membership I've just bought." But frequently those intentions fall by the wayside as life gets complicated and we struggle to find the time or motivation to follow through on them. There are many strategies to help make exercise a habit, and the one that works for you may not work for someone else. The paragraphs below have a few different suggestions; I recommend mixing and matching to try to find what will work best for you.

Get an exercise buddy. If you commit to meeting someone else at the gym or for a walk or run, skipping out on the day will mean breaking your plans with them. Having someone else hold you accountable can often be the push you need to get you moving consistently.

Sign up for a competition or race. Although this isn't always an option, depending on your activity of choice, having a set target and deadline is often motivating – especially as that deadline approaches.

When I first started running I decided to sign up for a half marathon, and then I pretty much had no choice but to train for it because I knew that was beyond my level of ability and I didn't want to die. You can also do this without a competition or race by just setting a specific goal and a realistic date to achieve it, but I find those less motivating because you don't have anything definite holding you accountable.

Put your exercise clothes on as soon as you get home from work, or stop at a gym before you even go home. A lot of times we intend to go work out but we get home, starting doing other stuff, and then decide it's too much effort and just don't feel like it anymore. If you already have your exercise clothes on, it just makes sense to get up and use them. If you don't even stop at home before you work out, you don't have the opportunity to get distracted and lose your motivation.

Don't make excuses. For me personally, I've found the most important thing is consistency. As soon as I make one excuse, it's like opening the door for any other excuse I can come up with. If I've committed to a work out one day, I do my best to do whatever it takes to get it in. Sometimes that means getting up extra early in the morning so I can do it before work, sometimes it means giving up something else I'd

rather do, and sometimes it can even mean doing it the day before or after instead, but no matter what I make sure that work out gets done.

Find something you love. This one is pretty self-explanatory. If you find something active that you truly enjoy doing, you won't need any tricks to get yourself to commit; you'll just want to do it, so you will.

Cutting Down on Sweets

There is room for some sweets in a healthy lifestyle, but they should be eaten in moderation. Probably the easiest way to eat them less is to just not keep them in the house. If you don't have bad stuff available, you're much more likely to eat the good stuff just because it's easier. But what about when you're not at home?

The bad news is that sugar has actually been shown to be addictive. The good news is that if you're able to hold off on sweets for even just a week or so, you'll notice you start craving them less. I've also found that it's easier if I make sure the sweets I *do* eat really count. I try to avoid eating any desserts that are mediocre because then I'm disappointed and just end up wanting more. Instead, I shoot for things I know I'll enjoy.

Some people also recommend substituting healthier options when your sweet tooth hits. Fruit contains a lot of sugar and may be able to satisfy your cravings. There are also a lot of recipes online for things like banana ice cream or chocolate avocado pudding. In general, I've found that when I'm craving something I need that specific thing, so as long as I'm staying within a reasonable quantity of sweets that week I just go ahead and eat it. However, this strategy of substitution can and does work for others.

Late Night Snacking

It's a common misconception that eating late at night will cause weight gain. Your body is able to metabolize your food at any time, regardless of how close you eat to when you wake up or go to bed. However, studies have found that people who frequently engage in late night snacking tend to eat unhealthier food, which ultimately does cause weight gain. So when it comes to snacking before bed, you have two options: either snack healthier or don't snack.

We eat for a lot of reasons that have nothing to do with hunger. Boredom eating, stress eating, even "habit" eating (like automatically getting popcorn at the movie theater because you just associate it with the movies) can all have significant impacts on our health. So if you find yourself reaching for snacks late at night, start by stopping and asking yourself if you're actually hungry. If the answer is no, you don't need to snack! Try to figure out what's making you want to eat and resolve that instead.

Sometimes I find that I *am* actually hungry, but I'm right about to get into bed and go to sleep anyway. In those cases, I'll often tell myself that I won't feel the hunger when I'm sleeping and there's no need to eat. If you're so hungry that you think it might prevent you from falling asleep go ahead and eat a healthy snack, but otherwise there's not much reason to eat within fifteen minutes or so of going to bed.

The other major problem with late night snacking is that a lot of times it's mindless eating where once we start, we don't stop. If you're reaching for something late at night, pour out a portion and put the rest away, then eat the portion you took out. If you put the rest of it away, you're less likely to keep eating it. If you find yourself wanting to go back for more, ask yourself if you're actually hungry and repeat the steps for non-hunger eating above.

Reducing Sodium

While getting too much sodium is associated with increased risk of heart disease, recent studies show that getting too little sodium can be just as dangerous. In general, packaged foods (especially frozen meals) tend to be extremely high in sodium because salt acts as a preservative. If you cook for yourself

most of the time, you will probably be ok in terms of sodium levels and I wouldn't bother to track them. However, if you frequently eat pre-cooked meals or go out to restaurants (more than three or four times per week), you may need to watch your intake. Unfortunately there aren't many secrets to this one aside from being aware of it and trying to make smarter, informed choices. Major chain restaurants are now required by law to provide nutrition information, and it's always listed on packaged foods, so you should be able to track the amount of sodium you consume. Try to shoot for below 2,500 mg on average.

Cutting Back on Sugary Drinks

I am 100% on board with how difficult this can be. Up until late in my senior year of college, I hated water and instead drank 6-8 glasses of apple juice per day. But then I started trying to lose weight and I realized that I was consuming 720 to 960 calories of apple *every day*. That's insane, and I'm pretty sure replacing apple juice with water was responsible for at least the first five pounds of weight that I lost. Essentially, what I'm saying is, water is good and sugary drinks are wasteful.

Enjoying the occasional soda is fine, of course; everything is fine in moderation. But if you're drinking sugary drinks all day long like I was, you're adding *way* too much sugar to your diet (which is not healthy!) and you're probably gaining weight as well.

When I quit drinking apple juice I went cold turkey and just learned to be ok with drinking water – and I haven't had any apple juice since. That worked for me, but if you really cannot stand water the good news is there are lots of alternatives. Head to a grocery store and look for low sugar powders or liquids that you can add to water for flavor. You can also try infusing your water with fruit or adding a little bit of lemon juice.

One additional consideration is caffeine; if whatever you've been drinking is high in caffeine, you'll want to take it a bit more slowly. Caffeine withdrawals can be pretty intense, so if you're going to commit to reducing your consumption of caffeinated sodas try slowly cutting back on the number you drink a day until you're able to cut them out without feeling the side effects of withdrawal. If you drink a lot of coffee it's ok to keep drinking it, but try to cut back on the amount of cream and sugar you add (if any).

Getting Enough Sleep

I wish I had a magical secret to this one, but I'm not too great at it either so unfortunately I have no super awesome tips. What I can say is that many times, our lack of sleep is due to a lack of effort to get to bed on time. Many of us have probably had those nights where we say we're just going to watch one episode of our show on Netflix and then looked up four episodes later to see it's now way past bedtime. Or maybe you've gotten lost in a book. Whatever the case, if you set an alarm to go off when you need to be heading to bed you can reduce incidents where you just lose track of time. If you make sleep a priority, you're much more likely to get enough.

Additionally, there are things you can do at night in order to help you wind down and fall asleep faster. Get into a night time routine that you do the same way every night, as this will help signal to your brain that it's time for bed. It's also a good idea to cut out screen time up to an hour before you plan to go to bed, as the blue light that our devices release confuses your body's internal clock so you won't feel as tired. If you like to read in bed, try reading a physical book with a lamp instead of reading on a tablet, phone, or computer. And if you must look at your phone right before you go to sleep, try to do it while you still have a larger light on as opposed to after you're in the dark.

Mental Battles

There are all kinds of mental challenges that you can face in an effort to get healthy. It's not easy to do, because a lot of us want to eat the unhealthy things or watch TV instead of going to the gym. It can also

be challenging to set realistic goals so we don't end up disappointed. I personally believe the mental component of a healthy lifestyle is the most difficult part, but fortunately there are a few things you can do to try to make it easier.

The first is to make sure you have a *really good* why. That slice of cheesecake may be more important to you than fitting into an old pair of pants, but it's probably not more important than being able to run around and play with your children. If your motivation is strong enough, you can think of that anytime you're tempted and it will help push you to make the smarter choice. If you do mess up, remember that tomorrow is always a new day. Nobody is going to be perfect, and I wouldn't recommend trying because it's too difficult to maintain. It's ok to eat too many cookies one day – just let it go and promise yourself you'll do better tomorrow.

In terms of setting realistic goals, remember that most of the pictures you see of celebrities and models have been photoshopped and are setting unrealistic standards. It also helps to remember that progress can and should be slow; the slower you lose weight, the more likely you are to keep it off (experts recommended no more than one to two pounds per week). And getting into shape takes time – you're building muscles and endurance, and that's not a quick process. Just remember that even slow progress is still progress, and celebrate the little victories. Did you lift five more pounds today than you did last week? Or get in an extra couple of reps? That's awesome! Congratulate yourself on a job well done, and then keep working toward your goals.

Carbs

Another common misconception? That carbs (or gluten!) are inherently bad. While there are many popular low carb fad diets today, carbohydrates are actually extremely important to your body's ability to function properly. Carbs are your primary source of energy, and if your body doesn't get enough to fuel your day it will have to use protein and fat to power itself instead. That means less protein going to where it needs to go – like your muscles and brain, and it can lead to muscular atrophy (muscle loss) and impaired brain function. Long term, consuming too few carbs can lead to serious illnesses. Especially for people who are active, getting sufficient carbohydrates in your diet is essential.

That said, you still want the majority of your carbs to come from fruits and vegetables. The rest should come from whole grains as much as possible. Refined grains (e.g. white bread and pasta) are ok, but you'll get much better nutritional value from whole wheat and the high amount of fiber will keep you full for longer.

A couple tips: wheat bread is not much better than white if it's only wheat; make sure the word "whole" is present. Also, "multigrain" is a sort of nutritional scam. It doesn't necessarily mean it's healthier, just that multiple (potentially refined) grains are used. In fact, Subway's multigrain bread does not have a single whole grain, which means you're no better off having that than you are eating their regular white bread.

Rewarding Yourself with Food

This is *extremely* common; in fact, it's part of our culture. When we celebrate we often go out to dinner. When we finally make it to the gym we tell ourselves we *earned* that cupcake. When we want to congratulate someone, we get them a cake. Even with kids, we tell them if they're good at the store they can get a cookie after. Despite how commonplace it is, using food as a reward creates an unhealthy psychological relationship, oftentimes with sweets.

The best way to handle this is to reprogram your brain to find a different reward. Next time you'd like to congratulate yourself for something, find another thing you enjoy. Get in a few weeks of consistent workouts? Reward yourself with a massage. Accomplished something big at work? Buy yourself a new video game. Ultimately you can choose whatever you like so long as it's not food and it feels like a treat.

Self-Image

Maintaining a positive, or even accurate, self-image is another thing that's extremely challenging. Most of us are our own harshest critic, and we view ourselves differently than most other people view us. There is no easy way to modify our self-images, but there are some things I've found that can help. One of the most effective methods, for me, has been to focus on what my body can do rather than what it looks like. Sure I may feel a bit pudgy this morning, but I can still pull myself up on silks fifteen feet in the air I feel like that makes me awesome, no matter what I see in the mirror. Although I may be the only one training to perform in a circus, this line of thinking can apply to any form of activity. Can you run a mile? Do ten push-ups? Reach past your toes and touch the ground? All of those things are signs that your body is amazing and capable, regardless of how it looks.

In cases of body dysmorphia, where what we see in the mirror does not match reality, it can help to separate yourself a bit. As an insecure middle schooler, I used to take a belt (or a string, whatever) and put it around my waist to measure how large it was. Then I'd take the belt off, make it into a loop the size of my waist, and look again. Most of the things I did in middle school were not particularly wise, but this method was great at making me realize that I was being too harsh. No matter how big I felt like my waist looked, the loop always looked very reasonably sized.

Most importantly, just try not to focus on it too much. Even if you don't like the way you want to today, there are still plenty of reasons to be confident. There is most definitely something that makes you awesome. Focus on whatever that is and own it. If you can be confident in one area, it will eventually spill over to other areas as well.