

Parish Nurses Note's – June 2024

How are you doing on your New Year's resolutions? Here are 10 "microbehaviors" to keep your health goals on track.

If you made a health-related New Year's resolution this year, you're not alone; **health-focused resolutions make up the top three most common goals**, year after year. And if you're still going strong, congratulations! You're in the minority; only 19% of resolution makers are still on track past the first month of the year.

Behavioral science gives us tons of insights about why New Year's resolutions are so hard to stick to, as well as **strategies for increasing our odds of success**. Most of these insights and tactics are pretty intuitive: make goals that are specific, measurable, and achievable; enlist accountability buddies; create a plan for how you're going to achieve them; be sure that they align with your values, and that they're (at least somewhat) enjoyable; break them down into bite-sized pieces. Sound familiar?

That guidance is great, and can be helpful if you already know exactly what your goal is and how to achieve it. But what if you don't know where to start, or feel overwhelmed by the prospect of making big changes to your lifestyle? I have good news: **there are some relatively minor tweaks you can make to your daily routines that can have an outsized impact on your health.**

I call these "microbehaviors," and they're the perfect first steps toward forging long-lasting habits. Starting with these can help you build momentum toward bigger lifestyle changes you may want to make down the line. Microbehaviors are easier to adopt than other, more "traditional" health behaviors. Here are some behavioral reasons why:

- **Planning fallacy:** People tend to underestimate the amount of time things will take, and overestimate the amount of time they'll have to dedicate to something. These microbehaviors can be done any time, any place, don't require any advance planning, and can be completed in five minutes or less.
- **Choice overload:** There are about a zillion things you can do to improve your health, and it can be hard to know which ones to try. The list of microbehaviors I've curated for you below take the guesswork out of the equation.
- **Endowed progress:** How good does it feel to cross something off your list? With microbehaviors, you can give yourself this sense of accomplishment every day, multiple times a day, instead of waiting to reach longer-term, yearlong milestones.
- **Habits and automaticity:** These microbehaviors fold in seamlessly with things you're already doing as you go about your day. No need to add a reminder in your phone, pack a gym bag, or buy any special equipment.

Have I piqued your curiosity? If so, read on for 10 microbehaviors to jumpstart your healthy lifestyle and optimize your physical, mental, and social well-being. I've broken them down into three overarching categories: nutrition, physical activity, and mental health. If you're looking to improve in one of these areas, start by choosing one or more from that list; if you'd like to go for a more general approach, you can start with one from each and work up from there!

Nutrition

1. **Up your veggie intake** by adding a handful of microgreens (such as microkale), sprouts (such as broccoli sprouts), or fresh herbs (such as basil) to one meal a day. [Microgreens, sprouts, and herbs are some of the most nutrient-dense foods](#) you can find, go with pretty much anything, and don't require any chopping or cooking. And many are grown hydroponically or aeroponically, meaning you don't even need to wash them!
2. **Drink more water** by [filling up a big jug with markings](#) to keep you on track throughout the day, and keep it on your desk. The jug itself will serve as a reminder to drink, and the markings will serve as an accountability mechanism. [When you drink enough water](#)—about 13 cups per day for men and about 9 cups per day for women—[everything works better](#), from your joints to your muscles, your brain to your digestive tract (and beyond)!
3. **Snack healthier** by replacing a sugary or salty afternoon snack with a sour one (namely, a fermented one). Fermented foods like pickles, sauerkraut, kimchi, kefir, yogurt, and kombucha stay good for a long time, so you can stock up and always have it in the house. [Regularly eating fermented foods can help with digestion](#), absorption of nutrients, and may even reduce feelings of stress and anxiety and reduce sugar cravings. You can even make your own fairly easily and cheaply.

Physical Activity

4. **Gain strength** with “exercise snacking.” A few times a day, perhaps when you find yourself mindlessly scrolling on your phone, do a quick “full body circuit”: 10-20 push-ups (on your knees is fine), 10-20 squats, and a 30-60 second plank. You'll feel the burn and get all the [benefits of moving your body](#), without having to change your clothes, wash your hair, or drive to the gym. If those movements aren't accessible to you, [try stretching as you're able](#), or contracting a muscle group for a few seconds at a time.
5. **Get extra movement** by taking the long way. Instead of grabbing the parking spot closest to the store or getting off the metro right at your destination, consider parking a bit farther away or getting off a stop early. Five minutes of walking here and there can really add up over time, bringing [benefits like reduced joint pain](#), decreased cancer risk, and increased immune function, to name just a few!
6. **Stretch out** with a three-minute circuit right when you get out of bed in the morning and right before getting into bed at night. Run through two series of [cat/cow](#), [downward dog](#), and [forward fold](#), holding each for 30 seconds while

taking deep breaths. After doing these three poses, you'll feel taller, lighter, and more relaxed.

Mental Health

7. **Nurture your relationships** by calling friends and family members while you're doing other tasks, like driving to pick up your kids, walking to the metro, or folding laundry. Connecting with others, even briefly ([about eight minutes seems to be the sweet spot](#)) can reduce feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety.
8. **Cut out the noise** by performing a social media audit. People spend hours of our lives on [social media, which has been linked to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem](#). However, you have the power to [curate your virtual spaces so they bring you joy](#). There are a few ways to do this, one of them being to unfollow any accounts that make you feel upset, anxious, or bad about yourself with the content they post.
9. **Re-center yourself** with a one-minute breathing exercise when you return to work after a break. With feet flat on the floor and eyes closed, breathe in for seven seconds, hold for seven seconds, and breathe out for seven seconds; repeat three times. [Simple mindfulness practices like this one can help reduce stress](#), improve your focus, and relieve anxiety—[potentially even as much as medication](#).
10. **Protect your peace** and quiet by setting your phone to “do not disturb” during working and resting hours. [Most phones can be set](#) to automatically do this during specified hours, so you don't have to remember every day. You won't miss the constant pinging, but you will almost definitely [increase your productivity and focus](#). Just do it. Now. Go.

We're living in a world where many people want to get healthier, but believe that they need to drastically change their behavior—and give up things that make them happy—in order to do so. We're also inundated with information about different diets, workouts, and other healthy habits we should adopt, making it hard to know where to start. The microbehaviors I've offered here are meant to be actionable, simple steps that you can easily take to get over that first hurdle and build momentum on a path toward your best health.