

Healthy Habits for Success


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Since the pandemic started, there has been a new normal for all of us. As many of us are still working from home, we are experiencing higher stress levels and facing overall disruption of our old schedule and habits. These disruptions may include a lack of nutritious foods, lack of planning, and/or lacking productivity. **Regardless of the circumstances, facilitating proper planning, and creating healthy habits can exhibit increased productivity, learning, and well-being.**

Habits are actions that are a response to contextual cues¹. These actions are triggered automatically and become second nature. These include examples, such as waking up every morning and ordering a large sugary latte or meditating every day for 10 minutes before work. Habits can either be conducive or harmful toward your goals and well-being. Disruption of routines, such as being in a new environment or any other setback can affect nutrition and stress levels. Which is why instilling healthy habits through stressful times are beneficial.

Eating Habits and the Effect on College Students



College is the time students become more independent with their dietary habits among other responsibilities. This transition period may also cause added stress from choosing appropriate meals. Traditionally, college students have access to dining halls where they are offered a limited number of options. Ordering food online is another convenient way to get food in a hurry. Many factors influence eating behavior in college students. According to a study by Sogari, Velez-Argumedo, Gómez, and Mora, the barriers to eating healthy include stress, easy access to fast-food, personal eating habits, food preferences, and nutritional knowledge. College students prioritize meals based on convenience and efficiency, price, and mood.² Due to these reasons, college students tend to choose calorie-dense options with infrequent servings of fruit and vegetables. However, **poor eating habits can lead to decreased energy levels, lessened concentration, and lessened ability to cope with stress.**³ **Poor dietary choices with refined carbohydrates and high-fat meals will leave students feeling tired and sluggish throughout the day.** These behaviors relating to stress and lack of time in college may be temporary, but habits formed during this time often continue into adulthood.⁴ In comparison to barriers to healthy eating, enabling healthy behavior is improved with food knowledge and education, meal planning and prepping, as well as being physically active.² Knowing why you want to change a habit and using intrinsic motivation are ways to create lasting, long-term healthy habits. **Studies show young adults who eat more fruits and vegetables report feelings greater curiosity, creativity, and well-being than counterparts.**

How to Create Healthy Habits and PQ Elements

Habit formation takes time and patience but has been proven effective for behavior change. **At any age, creating routine and healthy habits can take the stress and anxiety away from reverting to unhealthy meals.** The first step in creating a healthy habit is to be aware of the daily choices you already make and tweak one or two things at a time. Be consistent with the chosen actions and associate it with a current habit, such as planning out meals the night before or adding

in a serving of fruit with each meal. Small changes for an extended period will turn into a habit. Once it is attached to contextual cues it will take less effort to keep the new habit. Journaling or documenting can keep you accountable and achievements can increase self-efficacy leading to improved self-confidence.¹ According to Gardner, Lally, and Wardle, **habit formation may take 10 weeks to feel routine. Having a set routine each day reduces uncertainty in times of stress.**

During times of change, whether moving away to college or working in a new environment, it is important to adapt and learn to adjust. The ability to adapt and form new habits when a routine has been uprooted displays *Neuroplasticity* of the PQ elements. Neuroplasticity enforces new information to perform effectively.



Mental Activity refers to the brain's stability in performance and how eating habits can affect professional performance. Proper eating habits and routine can eliminate fluctuations in day to day functions. Through research, it has been shown that positive health promotion and habits can increase productivity and decrease absenteeism.⁵

Below are a series of questions and topics within the PQ elements to allow yourself to navigate the process of creating productive and lasting habits.

1. Step one is about **Self**. How do we define ourselves? What do we expect from our image and outlook?
 - a. Is there a gap between where you are now and where you want to be?
 - b. Is it important enough to personally invest in?
2. Step two is about **Mentalizing**. Do we really want it?
 - a. Ask yourself how much you want it.
 - b. Why do you want this?
3. Step three is about **Executive Functions**. How am I going to navigate the process?
 - a. How do I plan the weeks, months ahead?
 - b. Do I need professional assistance?
4. Step four is about **Neuroplasticity**. Changing habits, being creative, developing new behaviors to replace old ones. Ability to adapt to new situations.
 - a. Include a variety of food into diet and try new recipes.
 - b. Eliminate unproductive habits with new successful ones.
5. Finally, **Mental Activity**. Finding optimal ways to support the mind and body.
 - a. Make time to move your body and exercise.
 - b. Focus on optimizing sleep.

References

¹ Gardner B, Lally P, Wardle J. Making health habitual: the psychology of 'habit-formation' and general practice. *Br J Gen Pract.* 2012;62(605):664-666. doi:10.3399/bjgp12X659466

² Sogari, G., Velez-Argumedo, C., Gómez, M. I., & Mora, C. (2018). College Students and Eating Habits: A Study Using An Ecological Model for Healthy Behavior. *Nutrients*, *10*(12), 1823. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu10121823>

³ Nutrition. (n.d.). New York University. Retrieved from <https://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-wellness/live-well-nyu/priority-areas/nutrition.html>

⁴ Ganasegeran, K., Al-Dubai, S.A., Qureshi, A.M. *et al.* Social and psychological factors affecting eating habits among university students in a Malaysian medical school: a cross-sectional study. *Nutr J* **11**, 48 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1475-2891-11-48>

⁵ Grimani, A., Aboagye, E., & Kwak, L. (2019). The effectiveness of workplace nutrition and physical activity interventions in improving productivity, work performance and workability: a systematic review. *BMC public health*, *19*(1), 1676. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-8033-1>