



Chart Your Course

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Each of us would like to be healthy and living a pleasant and rewarding life, but not many of us are completely contented with our current status. We think we “should” eat better, be more active, engage in more recreation and relaxation and take more time for relationships. We dream of living a life that looks somewhat different than our current daily reality. Unfortunately, we rarely get to build in those improvements and we continue spending our time in a less than satisfactory personal world.

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Creating desired change is the key to improving our lives... however, creating change is not automatic, not easy and not instantaneous! Successfully making positive changes requires determined, consistent effort in a specific, pre-determined direction. Change is a result of a conscious decision to rid ourselves of some of the discomfort we experience by remaining where we are. When we are uncomfortable enough, we start to look seriously at options for improvements; until then, we look at excuses which allow us to maintain our current status. We're too busy or too tired; it takes too much time, effort or resources; it is too difficult, troublesome or unfamiliar; or we just don't know where to start! Change will only happen when we are ready and committed to doing the necessary work to make it happen. As we know, smokers don't simply quit because they suddenly learn that smoking isn't good for their health!

Fortunately, there are plenty of good strategies to prepare us. We can increase our awareness and knowledge of the benefits and the best methods for incorporating change into our routines and develop skills to make the process less demanding and success more likely.

Clearly define the changes you want... if our dreams of the future are vague, then we have no concrete indicators to let us know if we are making any progress or even if we are moving along the right path! If we wish to lead a healthier, happier life then we need to define what that means. Is it choosing a different lifestyle? Adopting a new attitude? Rearranging priorities? As we set targets for each area of our lives, to make it a reality we must define how to get there, in explicit detail.

Identify and plan for predictable obstacles... and there are many! If there weren't, we would have made the changes long ago. Plan before acting. This prevents wasted time and disillusionment with encountering obstacles that delay, distract or sabotage our efforts. Commitment and self-discipline are key concepts to ensuring success. We would consider it ridiculous that students would expect to get a “B” grade without doing the assignments, studying for exams or attending classes. Yet we sometimes vaguely feel that we should be able to live healthier lives without doing the appropriate preparation or consistently following through with plans or a schedule. Be honest with yourself, and others, in identifying the things which you can control. Don't give up too early when a little creative thinking, yours or a friend's, can help change your thinking and attitude about what is possible. Yes, we live in a rainy climate, but buying rain gear or walking in the school gym are alternatives to not walking at all! Living healthier is not a monumental task. It begins with incorporating a variety of simple strategies into our routines and schedules.

Establish routines... for the recurrent tasks of daily living. Routines help organize our days and make life more predictable. Without thinking, we know what is expected next. We can often respond based on time, activity or location cues. “Oh! Supper is finished, it's time for my walk!” When behaviours become fixed routines, they develop into automatic habits and eventually we call them our lifestyles. We can take control of the habits we form or else they will naturally evolve based on our normal activities... and that's not necessarily the best thing. If we

get used to regularly staying up late to finish correcting, thereby neglecting self care or relationships, this becomes a habit. Eventually, this normal practice is so familiar that we feel uncomfortable or guilty if we behave any differently.

Another important point about establishing and maintaining routines is that it adjusts the expectations of others toward us. If colleagues know that we always take a child to physiotherapy on Thursday afternoons they won't come looking for us to attend a meeting at that time. If family members know that we always walk after dinner, they know if they want something from us, it had better be arranged before we leave. It's up to us to adopt healthy routines and make them the rule, not the exception.

Get started and keep moving... procrastination is possibly the leading cause of failed initiatives. We easily come up with numerous reasons to put off "getting started". We often defer to: "when things settle down... we'll get together; I'll start walking; I'll have the time...". This is probably the excuse of choice! The solution to this mental dilemma is to select small, manageable tasks which are easily and quickly accomplished and move us toward meeting our major objectives. This gives us a sense of accomplishment and sustains motivation and progress. A word of caution: at any given time you, or someone you know, will perceive themselves to be in "crisis". Don't let this crisis determine how you handle your life. Yes! Of course there are occasions when everything else is put on hold to attend to a genuine emergency, but too often we misinterpret things as emergencies. This takes away from our sense of control over our lives and detracts from our focus on achieving goals. We can learn to handle emergencies without losing personal focus.

Evaluate the match between priorities and actions... to ensure that if you want to climb a mountain, you are heading in the right direction! When you know your goal, it is not difficult to determine whether your actions support achieving that goal or are roadblocks to it. Don't just give away your time, energy or other resources to a squeaky wheel. Before taking on new tasks or agreeing to do something else, determine where that fits with your own priorities. If we decide to do the simple or unimportant tasks because they are easy and make us feel good when completed, we are missing out on opportunities to move toward accomplishing our important goals. Consider the opportunities you have and the decisions you make. Consider also what you have traded for your choices!

For example, if an overflowing e-mail inbox is a hindrance to efficient communication or use of time, you obviously need to deal with the situation

differently from your current practice. Set aside a period of time, which is reasonable given the magnitude of the task and other existing demands. As with any routine, it helps if this task is undertaken at the same time every day, with the same time limits. Make decisions about every piece of mail as you see it. Immediately delete what you don't want, handle things requiring minimal response and schedule time for those requiring significant effort. Some things can be kept in a separate file but don't use that as a means of delaying decisions about junk!

Similarly to our inbox, changing our lifestyles really is a simple process. It's enacting the consistent commitment and self discipline which we find difficult. The following motto can inspire and direct our sustained action: "If you have rivers to cross, hang out with the bridge builders."

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