

the science of self-monitoring



Did you know that over two centuries ago, Benjamin Franklin used detailed grids to measure his progress toward the 13 goals he had set for himself? He believed this logging process deepened his self-understanding and enhanced his efforts to modify his behavior.

Today, many accomplished people use the same technique in their efforts to achieve more and perform better. Research confirms that recording aspects of behavior and progress toward goals—a process psychologists call **self-monitoring**—enhances success in making a variety of life changes. When combined with goal setting and other behavioral-change techniques, self-monitoring is a simple but powerful tool.

How can you use self-monitoring techniques to accomplish your exercise and healthy-living goals? Use these tips below from Stephen J. Kraus, PhD, a success scientist and author of *Psychological Foundations of Success: A Harvard-Trained Scientist Separates the Science of Success From Self-Help Snake Oil* (Next Level Science 2003).

Why Self-Monitoring Works

[1] Self-monitoring helps you avoid the “all-or-nothing” thinking that can often lead to the “snow-ball effect” (suffering a minor setback, considering yourself a “failure” and letting that small lapse snowball into a major relapse and a total collapse). Furthermore, self-monitoring tends to counteract people’s natural tendency to overlook progress, as when dieters focus on times they broke their diets, while minimizing all their successes.

Self-monitoring also facilitates “course corrections.” For example, if you record

progress toward eating and exercise goals, you may learn that you are suffering from “weekend snowballs”—making solid progress during the week, but letting minor slips snowball into periods of inactivity and overeating on weekends. Armed with this knowledge, you can then make “course corrections”: On weekends, you can redouble your efforts to exercise and perhaps decide to cook healthy meals at home rather than eat out.

Motivation to Improve

[3] When you are performing well, self-monitoring gives you the small, satisfying reward of recording progress and giving yourself a “good grade.” When you are struggling, giving yourself a “bad grade” is a gentle but thought-provoking reminder that encourages you to evaluate alternative strate-

resources for self-monitoring

- Self-monitoring software can simplify the entry of progress data and enable sophisticated analyses with point-and-click simplicity. For example, check out ChangePlanet’s Change Your Life software at www.RealScienceOfSuccess.com/Software.htm.
- DataforLife (www.dfl.com) sends users daily “iMails” containing questions about their behavior and progress toward goals. Users record their answers and get graphs of their progress directly in e-mails. DataforLife includes many health- and fitness-related questions, as well as summaries of research on effective weight loss techniques.

Tips for Success

[2] You will be more motivated and comply better with an exercise regimen if you begin by tracking progress on controllable behaviors, such as workout length and intensity, rather than physiological “outcome measures,” such as changes in weight, blood pressure, body fat or medication needs. You can’t wake up in the morning and say, “I will lose weight today.” But you can say, “I will go to the gym today” or “I will eat vegetables four times today.”

Another way to make self-monitoring successful is to use a spreadsheet to create visually compelling charts and graphs of your data. Put the data in front of you in a comprehensible, inspiring format. Most people find steadily increasing lines that reflect improved strength and conditioning or minutes exercised far more motivating and understandable than rows of numbers.

gies. If you do give yourself a “bad grade,” however, don’t beat yourself up. Instead, develop a strategy to help meet your goal. For example, if you skip your workout one day because of obligations at work or home, you can develop a strategy that will help you stick to the regime. That strategy might be waking up an hour earlier in the morning to do the exercise or writing the workout in your appointment book and honoring it as you would a business meeting. ■

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