

SMALL CHANGES, BIG RESULTS

My husband Bill and I were out for a walk not long ago on one of the first spring-like days of the year. The sun was shining and snow and ice were melting before our eyes. The first signs of spring always evoke the sense of hope that the winter is coming to an end and fairer days are on the way. Similarly, we're hearing that vaccines are beginning to arrive here in Ontario and plans are being made to begin vaccinating seniors and vulnerable others, there is hope that the worst days of the pandemic are coming to an end. We are still a ways off from the fairer days of summer, but we are beginning to see that perhaps, after some harsher times, better days are ahead.

Spending lots of time at home and not having social commitments has been the marker of the past year. I have observed in myself and have heard from many others that it has been very difficult to do things that we always thought we would do if only we had the time. Grief and uncertainty has not provided a good environment for creativity. I did not learn a language, write a book or learn to play the piano. Concentrating on reading or watching television has been a challenge. It took some effort (and cajoling from my husband) to exercise regularly, and even simple self-care strategies have been difficult to carry out with enthusiasm. Many of my friends and family are being hard on themselves for not accomplishing more, not taking more initiative to do the things they had wanted to do but previously did not have the time. But now, the winter is very slowly winding down and there are small glimmers of hope on the horizon. Perhaps we will not accomplish all of our life goals (or any) during these times, but we are getting through it.

A good friend of mine, who is an avid gardener, just ordered seeds for her garden and is looking forward to watching them start to grow. Perhaps we can take similarly simple steps to start planning and developing some habits that will bring us joy and wellbeing as we wait for more suitable conditions for us to move forward from this difficult year. We can start growing new habits, weeding out habits that are not working for us anymore, and get ready to nurture along the habits we planted before the pandemic and want to grow further when the climate is right.

I want to start planning how to best enjoy some new habits after this dark time has passed – just like my friend plans her garden at this time of year. Like planning a garden, here is what I'll do.

Choose a habit. As I look through my habit catalogue, here are some of the habits I could try. Learn to play an instrument, meditate, dance, exercise, keep a journal, create things, eat more vegetables, plan social events, write letters, etc. I have chosen to grow the habit of meditation into my self-care garden. It looks like it will be easy to grow.

Choose a habit that gives a lot for a little effort. There is a significant body of evidence to support that meditation provides lots of benefits to mental health and cognition. I have not practiced meditation before, so, starting small with big results to follow is where I need to begin.

Prepare a place to encourage growth. I'll plan a spot and time to grow the habit and make it easy to get the habit started. I will practice one minute of meditation before my afternoon coffee break; I will do it right after I stretch. It is easy for me to commit to one minute! (Even one minute of something new has benefits.) To try one minute meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6eFFCi12v8>

Track growth and feed the habit. I will keep track of my new habit and will never miss doing it two days in a row. I will give myself encouragement as a reward for practicing one minute every day to start.

Ask experts and others for advice. I am going to use the methods in James Clear's book, *Atomic Habits (2018)*, to grow this habit. I have studied behaviour change for a long time, and this book is by far the best one I have read. It will help me grow, weed out or nurture along habits. He offers a lot of great advice and support for growing habits.

Once I get the meditation habit started, I hope to add some other self-care habits ...only one or two at a time...until it feels right and not too crowded. Are you ready to start growing some self-care habits that will flourish when the times change? What habits do you want to keep? Which ones do you want to weed out? What do you want to return to doing once we are all safer again? Maybe

you can start to browse through your options and plan ahead for the brighter days that are coming. Maybe you can plant some seeds to get an early start.

To see more about James Clear's work on Atomic Habits:

<https://www.samuelthomasdavies.com/book-summaries/self-help/atomic-habits/>

Or better yet, pick up his book.