



The Seven Rs

How to sustain and strengthen new skills and patterns of behaviour.
(Adapted from *The Happiness Trap*, by Russ Harris).

There are hundreds of tools out there to help us with the difficult challenge of sustaining and strengthening new skills and new patterns of behaviour — however, we can pretty much bundle them all into what I call ‘The Seven Rs’:

1. *Reminders*
2. *Records*
3. *Rewards*
4. *Routines*
5. *Relationships*
6. *Reflecting*
7. *Restructuring the environment*

But ... before we explore them, a caution: ***Don’t try to use all these strategies!*** There are so many, if you try to use them all, you’ll probably get stressed or overwhelmed - and that’s not helpful. Read through the information and then pick ***just a few*** of the ideas that appeal to you, and experiment with them. Some people use three or four strategies, but others prefer just one or two. (You can always bring in more strategies later, if you need them.) Play around with these methods, and find out what works best for you.

1. Reminders

We can create all sorts of simple tools to help remind us of the new skill or behaviour we wish to start or keep doing. For example, we might create a pop-up or a screensaver on our computer or smartphone with an important word, phrase, image or symbol that reminds us to do it.

We might use the old favourite of writing a message on a post-it note and sticking it on the fridge, or bathroom mirror, or car dashboard. Or we might write something in a diary or calendar or in the 'notes' app of our smartphone.

Alternatively, we might put a brightly-coloured sticker on the strap of our wristwatch, the back of our smartphone or the keyboard of our computer, so that every time we use these devices, the sticker reminds us to do the new behaviour.

2. Records

We can keep records, noting down when and where we do the new behaviour or practice the new skill, and what the benefits are. Any diary, notebook, journal or calendar will suffice: on paper, on a whiteboard, or on a phone/computer screen.



3. Rewards

When we do some form of new behaviour, or practice some new skill, that takes us towards the sort of life, health and relationships we want to build ... well, hopefully this is rewarding in its own right. However, we can strengthen the new behaviour with additional rewards.

One form of reward is kind, encouraging self-talk (e.g. saying to yourself: 'Well done. You did it!'). Another form of reward is sharing your success and progress with a loved one who responds positively.

However, you might prefer more material rewards. For example, if you sustain this new behaviour for a whole week, you buy yourself or do something you really like (e.g. get a massage or buy a book).



4. Routines

If you get up every morning at the same time to go for a run, or do some stretching, or practice piano, over time this new pattern of behaviour starts to come naturally. You don't have to think so hard about doing it; it requires less 'willpower'; it becomes a part of your regular routine. So experiment: whatever your new skill or behaviour may be, see if you can build it into a regular routine so it becomes a normal, habitual part of daily life. For example, suppose every day you build a fifteen-minute walk into your lunchbreak; after a while, if you do it regularly enough, it will become a habit.

'Habit Stacking'

This means linking up a new pattern of behaviour to an existing, well-established pattern. For example, if you drive home from work every night (existing habit), then just before you get out of your car, you might do two minutes of 'dropping anchor' and reflect on what values you want to put into play when you walk in through the front door. This 'stacks' the new habit you want to develop (anchoring and values) onto the existing habit (driving home).

'Habit Pairing'

This means pairing up two different habits, so what you do becomes more enjoyable. For example, if you have a habit of listening to music or audiobooks or podcasts, and you want to build a habit of keeping on top of your domestic chores, you may combine the two: listen to music you love while ironing, or a great audiobook while doing the washing.



5. Relationships

It's easier to study if you have a 'study buddy'; easier to exercise if you have an 'exercise buddy'. In AA programs, they team you up with a sponsor who helps you stay sober when the going gets tough. So, can you find a kind, caring, encouraging person who can help support you with your new behaviour?

This could be a therapist, counsellor, coach or other health professional; or a friend, family member, or your partner. Maybe you can check in with this person on a regular basis, and tell them how well you are doing, as mentioned in 'Rewards'. Or maybe you can text or email your support person the 'Records' you've been keeping. Or maybe you can use the other person as a 'Reminder': you ask them to remind you to practice your new skill or behaviour.

For example, you might say to your friend or partner, 'When you see me worrying, can you please remind me to drop anchor?' or 'Can you please remind me to get ready, at least thirty minutes before we have to leave?'

'Body Doubling'

Body doubling is an odd, but increasingly popular term. If you're all by yourself, it can be hard to get started on doing what you really want to do. But if you can bring someone else into the room with you (doubling the amount of bodies in the room), it's often easier to get going. The other person may just be a 'comforting presence' who does their own thing, while you get on with the task you want to do. Or they may simultaneously do the same activity as you (e.g. you both do the same yoga routine). Or they may help you out in various ways, such as coaching you, or taking on part of the task.

6. Reflecting

Regularly take time to reflect on how you are behaving and what effect it is having on your life. You can do this via writing it down (Records) or discussing it with another person (Relationships). Or you can do this as a mental exercise throughout the day, or just before you go to bed, or just as you're waking up in the morning (building it into your Routine). You simply take a few moments to reflect on questions such as:

- 'How am I going?'
- 'What am I doing that's working?'
- 'What am I doing that's not working?'
- 'What can I do more of, or less of, or differently?'

Make sure you also reflect on times when you fall back into your old self-defeating patterns. Notice what triggers those relapses or setbacks, and notice what it costs you (i.e. how do you suffer?) when that happens. This doesn't mean beat yourself up! This means compassionately reflect on the genuine costs to your health and wellbeing of falling back into old self-defeating habits — and use your awareness of the suffering this causes you to help motivate yourself to get back on track.

7. Restructuring the environment

We can often restructure our environment to make our new behaviour easier and therefore more likely to sustain. For example, if the new behaviour is 'healthy eating' we can restructure the kitchen to make that easier: get rid of or hide away the junk food, and stock the fridge and pantry with the healthy stuff.

If we want to go to the gym in the morning, we could pack up our sports gear in our gym bag and place it by the side of the bed or somewhere else obvious and convenient, so it's all ready to go as soon as we get up. (And of course, when we see our gym kit lying there, it acts as a Reminder.)

Sometimes restructuring the environment means tidying up our desk or bedroom or living room, so that it's easier for us to do the things we want to. At other times, it involves removing or hiding things that distract us from what we want to do -e.g. we may put away a phone, or close a laptop, or switch off a TV, or take out that junk food.

This may also involve Relationships – for example, we bring another person into the environment ('body doubling') to help. It may also involve Reminders (e.g. putting up a poster or a post-it note), or something to keep Records on (e.g. a notebook). Basically, we rearrange the environment, and bring into it anything that may help.

The 7 Rs

So there you have it. 'The seven Rs':

1. Reminders

2. Records

3. Rewards

4. Routines

5. Relationships

6. Reflecting

7. Restructuring the environment

Now be creative; mix and match these methods to your heart's content, to create your own set of tools for lasting change. Good luck with it!