

## +7 TIPS TO HELP CHANGE

By Daniel G. Amen, MD

Are you having trouble sticking with The Daniel Plan? Don't beat yourself up. The Daniel Plan is designed to help you rewire your brain so you can get thinner, smarter, and happier. But don't expect it to be as easy as flipping a switch.

Did you know that your brain is hardwired to resist change? The human brain likes to conserve energy and doing the same-old same-old doesn't require as much energy as trying something new and different. No wonder it can be so hard to change lifelong habits!

Be patient. It takes time to overwrite old neural pathways with new ones. But you can do it! The Daniel Plan is here to help you along the way. Here are 7 tips to help retrain your brain so you can continue making progress.

1. **Don't try to change everything at once.** If you have come to the decision that you want to make changes in your life, you probably want them to happen NOW! But after nearly 30 years of helping patients navigate the change process, I have learned that taking a gradual approach is the surest way to success.

So many people try to change all at once, but this almost inevitably invites disappointment and failure. You don't have to change dozens of behaviors at once. Start with a few vital behaviors—the ones that will have the biggest immediate impact—and go from there.

2. **Believe you can do it.** If you don't believe in yourself, you will never achieve your goals. Lean on others in your small group for support and encouragement. When others believe in you, it can help you learn to believe in yourself.
3. **Focus on your successes.** Rather than dwelling on the habits you haven't managed to change yet, focus on the positive steps you have made. Are you drinking more water? Terrific! Are you eating more veggies? Excellent! Are you walking with your small group? Fantastic! Celebrating even the smallest successes can help keep you motivated.
4. **Don't swap one bad habit for another.** If you've got a sweet tooth, you may think that kicking your sugar habit is the ultimate goal. So instead of chomping on chocolate in the afternoon, you start sipping a diet soda or a café latte. Yes, it isn't chocolate, but it still isn't good for your brain or your weight-loss efforts. I see this so many times with my patients who quit one bad habit only to acquire another one in its place.

Some people even turn to illicit drugs. At the 2010 meeting of the American Society of Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery, researchers presented evidence that some people who have bariatric surgery replace their food addiction with drug or alcohol addiction. A survey of post-bariatric surgery patients in substance abuse programs revealed that 85 percent of them put some of the blame on "addiction substitution" and 75 percent thought "unresolved psychological issues" played a role in their substance abuse.

This doesn't surprise me because, as I like to say, stapling your stomach may be working on the wrong organ. There may be underlying biological, psychological, social, or spiritual causes for your overeating. If you get rid of your problem foods or have surgery to shrink your stomach but do NOT address these underlying problems, you won't make any progress. You will simply look for other ways to self-medicate. To be your best self, you need to kick your bad habits and replace them with healthy habits.

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5. **Get back on track—setbacks don't mean failure.** The road to change is not a one-way street. The steps to change are not static. I frequently tell my patients that their journey will be like going up and down a staircase. They will go up several steps, feel like they've made progress, then go back down a few steps when difficult situations arise. They will make several more steps of progress, then slip back a few, but usually not as many as before. Usually, the slope of progress is in an upward, positive direction.

If you aren't expecting to encounter setbacks, it can derail your efforts. Let's say you've been doing a great job sticking to your daily calorie limit and have lost 5 pounds after a few weeks. But then you go to your parents' house for the holidays where you overindulge and end up gaining 2 pounds in a week. Then you feel like you've blown it, so you continue overeating after you return home and then you give up entirely on changing.

Understanding that setbacks are part of the process and planning how to deal with them makes them easier to handle. So you ate more than you should during the holidays and gained a couple pounds—just get back onto your program the next day. Remember, losing weight is not a race, and faster is not necessarily better. Slow and steady is the healthiest way to lose weight and keep it off.

6. **If you hit a plateau, change things up a bit.** Hitting a plateau can be one of the most frustrating challenges in your weight-loss journey. A plateau is when your scale seems to get stuck on a certain number and just won't budge even though you haven't veered away from your new brain healthy habits. Rest assured that this is a common scenario.

First, ask yourself, is it really a plateau? Even if the number on the scale is stuck, your body composition might still be improving. So don't automatically get discouraged if the number on the scale isn't changing fast enough for you. We often get so hung up on a specific number that we lose sight of our real goal, which is to look slimmer, feel happier and more energetic, and be smarter.

If you really have hit a plateau, then it is probably time to add more intensity to your workout routine or adjust your calorie intake.

7. **Remember that change never stops.** Our bodies and lives are in a constant state of change. Marriages, divorces, job transfers, pregnancies, injuries, illnesses, and hormonal transitions are just some of the many things that keep us in flux.

Because of this, as you reach your initial goals, you may decide that you want even greater results. Or unexpected things might happen in your life that make you reevaluate your original benchmarks and downshift your expectations. Just know that with every change that comes into your life, you have the power to be in control of the way you handle that change.