

Read "50 Ways to Fix Your Life" (below) and respond to it in two paragraphs. In the **first** paragraph, state the author's purpose and give an example from the article that indicates that purpose. You could also write about why the author begins and ends her article with a quote from Benjamin Franklin. In the second paragraph, discuss your opinion on the issue of self-improvement.

"50 Ways to Fix Your Life" by Carolyn Kleiner Butler

Americans have long been captivated by the notion of self-improvement--none more so than Benjamin Franklin. An accomplished printer, author, postmaster, scientist, inventor, and diplomat who taught himself to speak five languages, this Founding Father never stopped striving to change for the better. At the tender age of 79, he "conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection," describing 13 virtues to aim for--temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquillity, chastity, and humility--and an intricate system for charting his progress in each. "Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation," he writes in his Autobiography. "Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions."

Today, self-help is not just a way of life--it's practically a national obsession. There are 7,500 books on the topic on amazon.com alone, covering just about every imaginable bad habit or dilemma...

Such offerings "appeal to the deeply felt American idea of 'before and after,' " says Robert Thompson, professor of media and popular culture at Syracuse University in New York, who points out the underlying similarities between Franklin and, say, Dr. Phil. "If you were born a peasant in a medieval village, you knew who you were and it was very hard to change that, but here there is fluidity of class, and entire industries and program types pop up that reflect the ultimate optimism that really anybody can be a 'swan' and completely turn [his or her] life around."

Time to change. The hard truth is that lasting change doesn't usually happen in a single TV season. In reality, of the 40 to 45 percent of people who will make New Year's resolutions come January--be it to quit smoking, start flossing, declutter, or finally plan for retirement--fewer than half will succeed within six months, according to John Norcross, professor of psychology at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania and coauthor of *Changing for Good*. But while many of us struggle to better ourselves in these various ways, always seeming to fall short, somehow, and to stay mired in destructive routines, the fact is that when someone makes a serious commitment to transform his or her life, it is possible. Norcross, who has been studying the subject for over 25 years, says that 70 to 80 percent of those who actively attempt a switch are ultimately successful, though it may take two, five, 10 tries or more. "Once people understand that change is a process--a developmental progression with distinct steps to move through--then our capacity to alter behavior is quite impressive," he says. "It is a marathon, not a 100-yard dash."

How can you cross that far-off finish line? While the key to success varies from person to person, experts agree that certain attitudes and behaviors both prior to and during the change process help predict who will make it. Suppose you want to lose 20 pounds: First and foremost, you really have to be ready to do it and understand that the pros outweigh the cons: that being heavy has harmful consequences, for one thing, and that losing weight has tangible benefits, like improved health. People who are committed to working hard at dieting and who view it as a major undertaking rather than a minor episode are more likely to stick with a program, and the more confidence you have in your ability to lose weight, the more likely it is that you will.

Once you decide that you are, indeed, prepared to break a bad habit, it's essential to set realistic goals--like losing 1 or 2 pounds a week versus a full suit size--and to come up with an equally sensible plan of attack. "Many of us don't change until we're in crisis mode, until we get diagnosed with high blood pressure or our mate leaves us or we lose our job, and once that moment comes we're looking for a big leap to get out of pain, but for most of us, those big leaps don't get results," says Robert Maurer, a clinical psychologist and author of *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way*. "Research on lasting change shows that it tends to be incremental, so that the body, the relationship, or the organization has a chance to adapt." ...It's also important to cleave to your strengths and interests while pursuing change. "It has to feel good for people to keep doing it," says medical psychologist Dan Baker, founding director of the life enhancement program at Canyon Ranch Health Resorts, who suggests that those who want to get into better shape and love the outdoors try cycling, not a stuffy gym; if you enjoy interacting with people, work out with a friend. Research shows that keeping track of your development in a visible way--charting weight loss, for one, or graphing your heart rate and stamina--is associated with sustainable lifestyle change, as is social support, whether in the form of friends, online discussion groups, or reliable, proven, self-help books...

Lastly, and most important, don't give up if you tumble off the wagon now and then. "When people who slip once equate it with a fall, a lapse becomes a relapse," says John Norcross. "Now they're drinking again, smoking again, overeating or not exercising at all, and they feel like a failure; they view it as evidence of their inability to change, and give up entirely." In contrast, triumphant changers often see a setback as a reason to recommit to their goal, and they get back on the horse immediately.

In the end, simply making a concerted effort to improve your lifestyle can have lasting benefits, no matter what the final result. Consider Franklin: A notorious ladies' man who had difficult relationships with his family, he also had varying levels of success with his quest for moral perfection. Though he made great strides overall, Franklin found the virtue of order--"Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time" --particularly vexing and ultimately unattainable. That's not to say his self-help experiment was a failure. Indeed, the inestimable Franklin recounts, "But, on the whole, tho' I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining, but fell far short of it, yet I was, by the endeavour, a better and a happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it." --*US News and World Report*, 2005.