

ADVICE FROM YOUR NEW COACH:

Actress/Activist/Athlete

Alexandra Paul

As an actress, Alexandra has starred in over 70 movies and television shows. (She starred on Baywatch, the world's most viewed television show.) She also appeared on VHF's February 2015 cover. You can learn more about her health & fitness coaching at www.AlexandraCoaching.com

THERE ARE SEVERAL FACTORS THAT KEEP US STUCK:

Our biology: If we do something over and over, the neural pathways in our brain attached to that action get stronger. The brain does not judge a habit as good or bad, it just knows we are still alive, so it figures it's a good idea to keep doing what we are doing! The more we operate on autopilot, the better for the brain, because it saves that precious energy we need for unexpected danger or to forage for food. Also, when you do something that gives you immediate pleasure, like kissing your lover or eating French fries, hormones are released in your body that make you feel good. The brain, which does not judge the long-term ramifications of this kissing or eating, only remembers that good feeling and wants more of it. Thus, a craving is born.

Our environment: Studies show that if your friends are fat, you are more likely to be fat. Humans strive to fit in—this, too, is a survival mechanism, as the safest place is the middle of the herd—so a personal improvement (losing weight, for example) destabilizes your relationships and provokes resistance in those around you. Sometimes it's easier to stay the same and not rock the boat, so being aware of how our environment encourages us to stay stuck is vital when we want to improve our lives.

Our minds: We humans automatically focus on the negative, even if there are a hundred positives around us. I am sure this is deeply biological too. Long ago, we were more apt to survive if we perceived trouble (like a mastodon running towards us), than if we were smelling the flowers. Nowadays, however, an attitude like that can give us high blood pressure and depression. It can also keep us stuck—when we focus on how we failed we can get disheartened instead of using our lapse as a learning opportunity.

by Alexandra Paul

Last year, my dedication to a healthy, active lifestyle and my passion for helping people evolved into a new career. I am now a wellness coach, which means I help people improve their lives by swapping their bad health habits for good ones. My clients make lifestyle changes they have struggled to attain for years, but could not reach alone.

Perhaps you are reading *Vegan Health & Fitness* because you want to go vegan, or you are already vegan, but you want to make healthier choices. Maybe you want to exercise more, reduce stress or lose a few pounds. All these have one thing in common: change. And we know that getting rid of unhealthy, ingrained daily habits and incorporating new, healthy ones is hard!

The reason we fail so often at exercising more or improving our eating is not because we are lazy, undetermined or lacking willpower. It is because we do not understand the anatomy of change - how to break a habit and form a new one.

Another skill we lack is how to formulate goals properly. We focus on an outcome like, "I want to lose 10 pounds," and do not set specific, actionable goals to achieve it like, "I am going to eat 5 servings of vegetables and drink 5 glasses of water every day instead of eating fried foods and soda." Being really clear on what behaviors we have to do consistently to reach our ideal outcome, instead of focusing on all the things we should not be doing, is a huge step in achieving our health and fitness dreams.

GIVEN THIS, THE KEYS TO CHANGE ARE:

- **Strengthening your brain's new neural pathways** by starting new, healthy routines (see my tips on Goal Setting, below). It will be hard in the beginning, but as the old pathways weaken you will not automatically turn to those bad habits- you will turn to your new, healthy ones!
- **Rewarding yourself** for staying on track will give you a dopamine release that will help your brain associate your new healthy behavior with positive feelings. Healthier desires are born!
- **Controlling your environment** will help you stay strong, especially in the beginning. That does not mean ditching your sedentary friends completely, but it does mean finding people with whom you have active life-giving experiences! If your commute includes driving by that tempting fast food restaurant, change your route; take workout gear to work so you can exercise at lunch; don't schedule too many dinners out, keep only healthy food in your kitchen... there are more ways you can control your life than you probably are presently allowing!

STAY POSITIVE!

Negative self-talk keeps us from being as powerful and wonderful as we could be. Find three good things to every bad thing in all areas of your life. I promise you they are there— you just aren't seeing them yet.

GOAL SETTING:

It is vital to keep your goals modest at first, as success builds on success! Make sure

your goals are attainable, so do not rush to exercising five times a week if you've been a couch potato for years. Get more ambitious in baby steps. The biggest reason people give up is that they bite off more than they can chew. Remember that incorporating new habits is not easy – your body is fighting you all the way at first; plus finding the time to fit new things into your life takes some trial and error.

Make sure your goals are actionable as I described above – and be as specific as you can about how many times a week, how much, and when you are going to do this new behavior. Anything less encourages you to procrastinate and avoid the changes you are implementing.

Planning is more important than willpower when it comes to improving our lives. Write down your (carefully-crafted) goals and put them where you see them regularly. Schedule your new habits into your calendar just as you would any important appointment. Foresee the challenges that may arise and devise strategies to deal with them before they



send you into a tailspin.

If you cannot do it alone, consider hiring a health coach. A lot of us work over the phone or by Skype so we take on clients all over the world. Your health, your life, and YOU are absolutely worth it!

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