Making change can appear so overwhelming that some of us will avoid it completely. Yet the specific tasks of making change can be quite manageable when we carefully examine what brings us to desire change, and then devise a sensible action plan. The key to making change successfully lies in the creation of a realistic plan of action.

Contemplating change. “Do I need to make some changes in my life? Am I able to mobilize myself to actually make change? How can I possibly be any different than I’ve always been?” The idea that things could get better for you can be at once exciting, frightening, anxiety-inducing, and discouraging. Our lives are spent repeating things in habit form, almost without realizing there can be other ways of doing things. Yet, with the desire for change, AND the belief that change is possible, you can begin to create (meaningful and lasting) change in your life.

Where to begin. The most effective path toward making change is by plotting your starting point and determining what you want to change in your life. For some people, it’s fairly easy to identify what’s wrong while for others, it can be hard to be specific. Examine the various aspects of your life: your interpersonal relationships, your work, your family, your own sense of self. Which one of these causes the most stress in your life? This is often a great place to start. Another option would be to decide which area would be easiest for success. Whether you choose the easiest area to improve, or the one that needs improving the most, just make a decision on what to change so you can make a commitment. Below are the basic steps toward jumpstarting change.

Day 1: Identify target for change
Day 2: Eliminate obstacles to change
Day 3: Plan path toward change to begin moving forward/taking steps

In just three days. Change can begin in just three days. This is well worth repeating: change can begin in just three days. It will take longer to achieve lasting change and maintain change over time, but initiating change can be as brief as just three days. So, while you will not be able to completely eradicate long standing habits in three days, you will be able plan a realistic attack and pursuit of your goals.

DAY 1: Identify target for change. By specifically determining what needs to be different, we can eliminate a lot of mental clutter that winds up getting in our way. Determining your goal initiates your course toward change and starts you on the path toward success. Obstacles and distractions to making change might include extraneous material such as what others might think, why the timing is wrong, or even how the change seems too difficult to attempt. Instead, simply identify what needs to change, then chisel down the idea to formulate specific goals. Being as specific as possible will increase the likelihood for a successful outcome. Rather than target weight loss, for example, we could decide that we want to lose ten pounds before Memorial Day.
DAY 2: Eliminate obstacles to change. Sometimes the very reason we have difficulty making change is because we allow obstacles to disrupt and distract us from being successful. What exactly is preventing you from making this change? Do you need emotional support? Would it help to revise your daily schedule? Maybe shifting your priorities would allow change to begin. Sometimes there is an emotion that interferes with making progress toward change. There can be more than one obstacle to confront, but confronting and overcoming your obstacles is the key to success.

To combat negative feelings, first identify those feelings. Squash anxiety by breaking big goals into smaller, more attainable ones. Defeat negativity by recognizing that your power lies in your will to succeed. Knowing specifically what gets in your way guides your path to success. Identify allies in your life who can support you through transition. If you need the help of a professional, make allowance for expert assistance, be it a trainer, psychologist, skilled professional, trusted advisor, or good friend. Lasting change often requires combined effort. Having the support of one or of many does not reduce the results of your efforts. Allowing others to help can make the difference between success and stagnation. You will have the best results by utilizing all available resources.

DAY 3: Plan path toward change to begin moving forward/taking steps. By eliminating obstacles, you give yourself the greatest likelihood for success in making change. Next in line is actually charting the path toward change. With goals in mind, secure the support of any and all individuals who might offer assistance and encouragement. What role will each supporter occupy, and what will your role be? Decide first which responsibilities belong to whom before you formulate the plan of action. Step by step, break down what needs to happen in order for change to occur. Make yourself a list but write in pencil so you can make adjustments as needed. As you approach your first step, realize that change requires effort that you sustain over time. After you complete a step, have a small celebration to mark little successes along your way. The big celebration should await you when your list is complete and noticeable change happens.

Practice, practice, practice. For any behavior to become routine, persistent practice is essential to success. A new behavior will only become a habit with sufficient practice. All habits are behaviors we repeat until we integrate these behaviors into our everyday routines. If we relax our efforts before any change becomes permanent, we have practiced insufficiently and new habits will not crystalize. Lasting change requires ongoing commitment to not just realizing our goals, but to maintaining success on a permanent basis. Making a commitment to practicing your new behavior will insure it becomes a habit.

Assess your progress. At regular intervals, it will really help if you assess your progress. Begin with daily assessment. In one day’s time, have you accomplished what you intended? If so, celebrate your success! If you were unable to make the progress you anticipated, it is extremely important to understand why, and to determine what interfered with your progress. Once you understand your obstacles, you can work to overcome them. Adjust your goals and follow through accordingly. Revise your plan whenever your assessment indicates lack of progress.

Bring it all together. Change can happen. Despite having feelings that might interfere or break our confidence, we can overcome any and all obstacles by anticipating those which might impede our progress and devising a plan that utilizes our resources to make progress one step at a time. Lasting change occurs when new behaviors become habits through persistence, repetition, and practice over an extended period of time.

Janie Feldman, PsyD, licensed psychologist in Warren, NJ, has over 20 years’ experience providing psychotherapy, consultation, and assessment to adults, teenagers, and children. Dr. Feldman conducts
Friendship Groups, a form of social skills training in a group therapy format. Utilizing Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Dr. Feldman offers effective treatment for anxiety, depression, OCD, ADHD, and other mental health challenges. Appearing live on the cable television show “Real Life with Mary Amorosa,” she fielded callers’ questions and discussed reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attack, surviving marital affairs, managing children’s behavior and exploring female aggression. Dr. Feldman has written numerous articles and blogs, and frequently posts informative and inspirational tweets on Twitter. Follow her at @DrJanieFeldman or visit her at www.drjanie.com.