

## Getting back into a new-normal routine...

It's November. A very different November from all the Novembers that came before, but November nonetheless. The schools have started, work is busy, the streets and restaurants are buzzing. Life in China has already adjusted to the "new normal" for months now. Getting back into a routine after a holiday is difficult. But after a long time of working-from-home or quarantine it's extremely challenging. We are telling ourselves that all we need is to set some goals and be a little bit more productive. Maybe also lose a few kilos. But it's so hard..... How do we do that again?

Goal setting can be a powerful thing. Having goals makes you happier and it helps you to be more successful. We can probably all make our goals SMART\* and outline the steps to get there. However before you set a goal you have to make sure it aligns with your personal values. Be honest with yourself: what do you want to do this for? Do you get excited when you think about the end goal or are you doing it because this is what you are *supposed* to do? I knew a lady who said she wanted to lose weight and needed help with reaching that goal. We found out that somehow she believed that she would have more friends if she were a skinnier version of herself. What she really wanted was more social connections.

Visualising your end goal helps too. Picture yourself in the future, when you have reached your goal. How does it feel, how does it look? What will be different from where you are now? Also visualise the roadblocks on the way, the obstacles that you may encounter. If this or that happens, what will I do next? How will I respond? Picture all the obstacles that you can think of so that you are prepared.

OK, so you have set a nice goal, it is aligned with your values, you made it SMART and you visualised both the end goals and the "if-then"\*\*\* obstacles. Then somehow we don't follow through and we get frustrated and angry with ourselves: why don't I have any self-discipline? Other people seem to have more willpower than me, what is wrong with me?

Nothing is wrong with you. The thing is, willpower is overrated. We only have so much for each day, and we shouldn't beat ourselves up over it. It is not that other people have more self-discipline than you, but they have probably set habits or rituals. Here we have the secret:

Think about brushing your teeth every day. It's not that we have set out a smart goal with clear steps and visualised ourselves with beautiful teeth, is it? Somehow we started doing it many years ago and now, our hands are just doing the brushing without a conscious thought. No willpower needed and we don't ever forget to do it: the behaviour has become a habit. If you can repeat something every day for about 30 days it will no longer require self-discipline, because you have set a ritual. You can usually only do this successfully for one behavioural change at a time, so don't overdo it.

Setting habits is probably the best way for lasting change in behaviour. But how do we make it through these first 30 days? Here are a few practical tips. Tell people about what you are going to do. That will make you feel accountable for it. Make a promise to yourself by writing it on your calendar or in your paper diary (yes, with pen and paper!). Set reminders on your phone or on post-its. Let your physical environment help you: put bad food out of your sight if eating healthy is the goal, place your trainers near the door if the gym is the goal.

Now all you need is to get started. Just do it.

### **About Ans Hooft**

Ans is a Life Coach / Stress Counsellor / Job Coach from The Netherlands. She has had a private practice in Shanghai since 2011, where she helps clients to cope with all sorts of life problems, changes, relationship issues, goal setting and stress management.

Before becoming a coach she had 20+ years' experience in HR, recruitment and career counselling. She has been in Shanghai for more than 10 years and in South Africa for 2 years.

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\*SMART - Smart, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Timebound. Google "SMART goals" for very helpful templates.

\*\*"If-then planning," is a technique that is uniquely useful when it comes to resisting temptation and building good habits.