

Chapter 2

Reprogram Your Brain: The Four-Week Addicted-to-Health Plan

The brain has the ability to adapt at any time in our lives to new behaviors and new conditions. Just as an addict is drawn to a substance like nicotine because of its potent biological “rewards,” we can train our brain to respond with the same chemistry so that we become “addicted” to health-promoting behaviors like exercising, meditating, and eating right. In other words, we *can* cultivate the biological interactions that connect thought, feeling, and behavior so that we become “addicted” to choices that will make us healthier, happier people.

Current scientific evidence supports the idea that our primal mind-body systems are designed to adapt in ways that *reward* and *reinforce* positive emotions and thoughts and effective behavioral change. This means that even deeply rooted thoughts and behaviors that cause bad health can be “rewired” to promote better health and to reduce the risk of age-related disease.

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The good news is that in as little as four weeks, these systems can be ignited to change your attitude, outlook, and life forever.

The catch? This is challenging work. First you must believe that even small and “trivial” changes in your behavior start a cascade of life-enhancing changes deep inside you. For example, one hour of gardening per week could lower your risk of sudden cardiac death by as much as 66 percent. Walking one hour a week will significantly lower your risk of coronary artery disease. And while only four weeks are necessary to tip your mind-emotion-brain-body momentum in a positively reinforcing direction and to experience immediate results, you must ultimately redefine who you are and develop new healthier “addictions” and habits for the program to succeed in the long run.

But you and your brain are designed for just that. By choosing to put yourself into this four-week program, you are committing to redefining the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that have defined your life to this point. The beauty of your new addiction will be that you’ll feel too good to want to turn back. The more you do, the more you will do. The more you change, the more you will want to change.

Now that you’ve read in Chapter 1 about the strategies I’ve successfully applied in my own life, you’re ready for an overview of the four-week plan that will set you on the path to feeling better, aging well, and living longer.

For this program, you’ll be working in four areas of your life:

- Nutrition
- Activity and Movement
- Mindfulness and Meditation
- Social/Relationships and Positive Emotional States

Use the chart at the end of this chapter and the following guidelines to assess your current behavior in each category and for ideas on how to add small,

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doable, but meaningful and value-satisfying life changes each week. Some will look easy, but taking little steps will increase your capacity to get addicted to health! Remember, as you begin taking the small steps that will move you toward your ultimate four-week goals, you will consciously and subconsciously be transforming your thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and health.

Don't be discouraged if old thoughts and feelings attempt to sabotage your progress. Stay the course. This is your life. You deserve optimal health! Feel free to choose as many four-week goals as you feel comfortable pursuing and see this as a foundation to build upon. If you don't feel ready to take on the full program at once, commit to at least one or two goals in each of the four areas over the next four weeks. Then each month, you can add another goal in each area and pause to reflect on the progress you're making.

This is a lifetime challenge, a flame that you will ignite by committing yourself to successfully completing some of these goals over the next four weeks.

You must believe that you have within you the capacity for change and inner healing. You must see yourself as the ultimate agent of your own "self-care." Your greatest potential for health and happiness is in your hands. You must not overlook this gift and opportunity!

THE FOUR-WEEK ADDICTED-TO-HEALTH PLAN

Though your goals will need to be individualized, here are some general guidelines guaranteed to get you hooked. Please note that each of the "goals" and "action steps" for the program will be explained in much greater detail in the ensuing chapters.

NUTRITION: YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Consider this: By more conscious selection of foods that result in a reduction of glycation and inflammation (see Chapter 9 for details), you will increase your odds of living longer and disease free. And in as little as four weeks, you

will experience a dramatic reduction in your carbohydrate craving and the addictive drive to consume more. Imagine craving fresh cruciferous vegetables as much as you once craved potato chips! You'll lose weight, reduce your waistline, and reduce the risk of metabolic syndrome (high blood pressure, high triglycerides, insulin resistance or pre-diabetes, and diabetes). You will also look and feel better, and you'll experience greater control over your nutritional choices and health. This is more than just a pie-in-the-sky promise. This is a biologically induced adaptation, and with motivation, discipline, and strong commitment, you can adapt your mind and body in a short time frame. But it's up to you. Here we go.

Goals:

1. Reduce the number of high glycemic load calories you ingest, e.g., breads, pastries, desserts, bagels, potatoes, sugar-sweetened drinks, chips, pretzels, candy, etc.
2. Reduce your weight and reduce your risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease, e.g., reverse the tendency toward lifestyle or metabolic syndrome.
3. Enhance your mood.
4. Reduce inflammation and formation of "oxygen free radicals," damaging byproducts of oxidation or metabolism of nutrients that are responsible for most age-related diseases.
5. Reduce your risk of age-related disease, enhancing greater wellness and vitality.

Action Steps:

Things to do daily:

- Eat breakfast within one hour of waking up.
- Eat 30 grams of fiber daily.
- Color your plate with fruits and vegetables for at least one meal.
- When cooking with oil, cook with extra virgin olive oil.
- Avoid going more than three hours without eating something of low glycemic index, e.g., one serving of nuts or raw vegetables, one serving of low-fat yogurt, or a boiled egg. Strive for variety and balance, in other words, don't eat four boiled eggs per day!
- Try Stevia as a natural sweetener.

- Increase consumption of healthy fats, e.g., omega-3's from such sources as walnuts, salmon, and flaxseed and reduce unhealthy hydrogenated and trans fats.
- Eat more cruciferous vegetables, e.g., broccoli, kale, cauliflower, asparagus, green leafy varieties.
- Eat more soy products—tofu, tempah, soy milk—a good source of protein, vitamins, and disease-protective isoflavones.

Things to do per week of the plan:

Week 1

- *Eliminate* just *two* desserts and/or snacks per week (not per day, per week—you can do that!).
- *Substitute* water for *two* sugar-sweetened soft drinks per week (not per day, per week—you can do that!).
- *Substitute* whole-grain products for *two* servings of refined white flour/starches per week.
- *Limit* visits to fast-food restaurants to *once* per week maximum.
- *Add one more* fruit or vegetable portion to your daily diet.
- *Eat one* serving per week of foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, e.g., fatty fish (salmon, albacore tuna), tofu, walnuts, flaxseed, and soybeans.
- *Eat at least three portions per week* of cruciferous vegetables, e.g., broccoli, spinach, asparagus, and fruits like strawberries, blackberries, cherries, and blueberries, all of which are high in vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, and anti-oxidants, and have a low glycemic load.

Week 2

- *Eliminate three* desserts and/or snacks per week.
- *Substitute* water for *three* sugar-sweetened soft drinks per week.
- *Substitute* whole-grain products for *three* portions of refined white flour/starches per week.
- *Quit* fast-food restaurants all together!

- *Add two more* fruits and vegetable portions to your daily diet.
- *Eat one to two* servings per week of foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, e.g., fatty fish (salmon or albacore tuna), tofu, walnuts, flaxseed, and soybeans.
- *Eat at least three or four* portions per week of cruciferous vegetables, e.g., broccoli, spinach, asparagus and fruits like strawberries, blackberries, cherries and blueberries.

Week 3

- *Eliminate four* desserts and/or snacks per week.
- *Substitute* water for *four* sugar-sweetened soft drinks per week.
- *Substitute* whole-grain products for *four* portions of refined white flour/starches per week.
- *Quit* fast-food restaurants all together!
- *Add three more* fruits and vegetable portions to your daily diet.
- *Eat one to two* servings per week of foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, e.g., fatty fish (salmon, albacore tuna), tofu, walnuts, flaxseed, and soybeans.
- *Eat at least four or five* portions per week of cruciferous vegetables, e.g., broccoli, spinach, asparagus, and fruits like strawberries, blackberries, cherries, and blueberries.

Week 4 and Beyond

- *Eliminate five* desserts and/or snacks per week.
- *Substitute* water for *five* sugar-sweetened soft drinks, and *limit* yourself to *no more than two* sugar-sweetened drinks per week.
- *Substitute* whole-grain products for *five* portions of refined white/ flour starches per week.
- *Drive past all "drive-in" restaurants.* Give up fast food.
- *Eat six to nine* portions per day of fruits and vegetables, including legumes, lentils soy, etc.
- *Eat two servings* per week of foods high in omega-3 fatty acids, e.g., fatty fish (salmon or albacore tuna), tofu, tempah, walnuts, flaxseed, and soybeans.

- *Eat one portion daily* of cruciferous vegetables, e.g., broccoli, spinach, and asparagus and fruits like strawberries, blackberries, cherries, and blueberries.

ACTIVITY, EXERCISE, AND MOVEMENT: MOTION IS THE LOTION

Positive addictions, such as the reward-endorphin pleasure response that comes with exercise and movement, will take over in as little as four weeks.

Goals:

1. Improve physical, emotional, and mental health.
2. Reduce weight.
3. Reduce cardiovascular risk and risk of diabetes.
4. Enhance mood and energy level.
5. Enhance cognitive functioning, e.g., reasoning and memory.
6. Remember that small, seemingly insignificant increments of change will pay handsomely over time.
7. Reduce mediators of allostatic load, e.g., cortisol and insulin.
8. Moderate pain by enhancing dopamine and endorphin systems.

ACTIONS STEPS:

Things to do daily:

- Exercise your brain with reading, word puzzles, or journal writing.

Things to do at least once every week:

- Dance to the tunes you love while wearing your portable music player or listening on your home system.
- Participate in a relaxing recreational activity you love, like gardening or playing with your children or grandchildren.

Things to do per week of the plan in addition to the list above:

Week 1

- Get into motion with any physical aerobic activity appropriate for your current condition, e.g., walking, jogging, biking, etc., by exercising for *ten to fifteen minutes, three times per week*.

- Practice a resistance exercise (pushing to twelve reps with maximum effort) for *ten to fifteen minutes, once per week.*

Week 2

- *Increase* your aerobic exercise by *five minutes per session.*
- Practice a resistance exercise (pushing to twelve reps with maximum effort) for *ten to fifteen minutes, one to two times per week.*

Week 3

- Increase your aerobic exercise by *ten minutes per session.*
- Practice a resistance exercise (pushing to twelve reps with maximum effort) for *ten to fifteen minutes, two to three times per week.*

Week 4 and Beyond

- Target at least *twenty to thirty minutes* of aerobic exercise, *five times per week.* This can vary from brisk walking to running, biking, swimming, etc. Walking is effective and portable.
- Practice a resistance exercise (pushing to twelve reps with maximum effort) for *twenty minutes, three times per week.*

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE AND MEDITATION

In as little as four weeks, mindfulness practice will profoundly bring you into better balance with your parasympathetic (calm-protective) tone and your sympathetic (fight-flight stress response) tone. This balance will improve every dimension of your health and give you the basis for a long life.

Goals:

1. Reduce stress, as many illnesses are related to or exacerbated by excess stress.
2. Enhance clarity of thought and enhance moods and positive emotional states.
3. Enhance feelings of peace and equanimity.
4. Enhance experiences and interactions.
5. Improve your health via the cascade of positive mind-body effects created when you reduce stress through mindfulness practice and meditation.

6. Reduce mediators of allostatic load, e.g., cortisol and the fight-flight stress response.
7. Enhance parasympathetic (calm and protective) central nervous system tone.

Action Steps:

Things to do daily:

- Cultivate a stronger sense of “non-self” through altruism and compassion. Perform an act of kindness to yourself or others at least once a day. This could be saying hello to a stranger, opening the door for someone whose hands are full, offering assistance to someone who appears lost or overwhelmed, or forgiving yourself for a mistake.
- Start a gratitude journal and spend *five minutes* a day jotting down a few experiences or people you feel grateful for that could easily be taken for granted otherwise.
- Notice and appreciate nature.

Things to do at least once every week:

- Yoga is an excellent discipline for balance, mindfulness, and flexibility. Participating in one class per week with instruction or with the use of a home, self-guided tape will quickly leave you feeling more calm and satisfied.
- Worship, if appropriate, based on your values and preferences, religion or spirituality.

Week 1

- Cultivate a form of meditation that feels right to you: prayer, paced respirations, relaxation response, body scan, self-hypnosis, guided imagery, walking meditation, or Tai Chi, etc. See chapter 17 for descriptions and how to get started performing these various forms of mindfulness practice. Perform one of these practices for *ten minutes, three times per week*.
- Spend some time outdoors experiencing nature—take a walk, ride a bike on a path, sit under a tree, watch a sunset—*once per week*.
- Avoiding thinking about or doing any work-related activities *one evening per week*.

Week 2

- Increase your mindfulness/meditation practice to *fifteen minutes, three times per week*.
- Spend time outdoors experiencing nature *twice per week*.
- Avoiding thinking about or doing any work-related activities *two evenings per week*.

Week 3

- Increase your mindfulness/meditation practice to *twenty minutes, three times per week*.
- Spend time outdoors experiencing nature *three times per week*.
- Avoid thinking about or doing any work-related activities *three evening per week*.

Week 4

- Perform your mindfulness/meditation practice *twenty to thirty minutes, three times per week*.
- Spend time outdoors experiencing nature at least *four times per week*.
- Avoid thinking about or doing any work-related activities at least *four evening per week* or make sure you have *one-day per week* completely work-free.

SOCIAL/RELATIONSHIPS AND POSITIVE EMOTIONAL STATES**Goals:**

1. To reduce stress, enhance positive emotional states, and create feelings of satisfaction.
2. Build support and enhance resilience through bonding.
3. Leverage relationship capital to enhance fulfillment of values.
4. Develop more effective interpersonal connection, including conflict management, and satisfaction at work, love, and play.
5. Improve health by creating the many positive mind-body effects associated with positive social relationships.
6. Enhancement of bonding, reward, and positive emotion mediators, e.g., oxytocin, dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin.

Action Steps

Things to do daily:

- Tell your special friends and family how much you love them and/or appreciate them.
- Cuddle with someone you love—a significant other or a pet for no less than five minutes each day.
- Make a conscious effort to smile at someone . . . reciprocity is the natural rule here and will reinforce this socially connecting behavior.

Things to do at least once per month:

- Take part in an organized social outing—reading club, bridge club, etc.—at least once a month.
- Volunteer to help with a program or cause. Give generously. It can be in the form of time, talent, or treasure.

Week 1

- Commit to developing knowledge and skill in interpersonal management (see Chapters 10 and 13 on conflict management. Also refer to suggested reading list at the end of the book).
- Make a list of friends and family members with whom you've been out of touch.
- Think about someone who has wronged you, someone you haven't forgiven, and think about the potential health benefits to you for forgiving them (see Chapter 12).
- Explore an opportunity to volunteer your time and talent to a cause that means a lot to you. Make a list of possible choices.
- Make a list of possible social groups you could join.
- Make a list of people who have touched your life.
- Think about ways to add more laughter into your life. Make a list of funny TV shows and DVDs. Investigate comedy clubs.

Week 2

- Consider the principles outlined in Chapter 10 on conflict management.

- Contact by phone, email, or snail mail at least one of the friends or family members with whom you've been out of touch.
- Forgive someone who has done a slight wrong to you.
- Narrow your list of volunteer opportunities. Contact them for more information.
- Narrow your list of social groups you could join and contact them for more information.
- Contact by phone, email, or snail mail, at least one person who's touched your life.
- Order a funny DVD or plan to watch a funny TV show or attend a comedic performance.

Week 3

- Take one step toward resolving a conflict.
- Contact another friend or family member with whom you've been out of touch.
- Write a list of the pros and cons of forgiving someone who has done a major wrong to you. Read Chapter 12 for information on how forgiving such a person benefits you, not the transgressor.
- Select one or two volunteer opportunities and visit the organization to get a better idea of the experience
- Select one or two social groups and plan an exploratory meeting/visit.
- Contact by phone, email, or snail mail another person who has touched your life.
- Watch a funny DVD or TV show for thirty minutes.

Week 4

- Commit to being aware of conflict management techniques and to practicing conflict management in your daily life.
- Stay aware of friends or family with whom you are out of touch, and consider re-starting or maintaining these friendships and relationships.
- Forgive someone who has done a major wrong to you. Practice forgiveness toward yourself and others.

- Join a volunteer group and commit to it. If it doesn't work out, commit to finding one that does.
- Join a social group. If it doesn't work out, keep looking until you find a good fit.
- Keep a mental or written list of people who touch your life in positive ways, and then contact them and let them know your appreciation when appropriate.
- Schedule time for laughter via a funny DVD or TV show (or out-ing) for thirty minutes, three times per week.

This is the plan to get you started with doable action steps that will build into your new addiction to healthy behavior. Don't try to jump ahead and make big changes all at once. The idea is that small changes are doable. Because they're doable, they're not overwhelming, therefore you'll keep doing them until they become a habit. As you move forward, you can increase the effort because by then you'll be getting a reward that fuels both the present effort and the motivation necessary to continue.

Throughout the book, I'll suggest other strategies for success as you move forward on your journey. As you add new positive behaviors each week, try to be consciously aware of how your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are influenced by your successful pursuit of these goals and activities. Remember that there is a symphony of biological activity that underlies these transformations in your life. This symphony, often played beneath your conscious state, will continue to change your health for the better even when the changes seem subtle and insignificant to you. Changes over a lifetime will not appear as dramatic on a day-to-day basis unless you are more mindful of them. While your new growing addiction to health will not be as potent in the short term as a nicotine addiction, the subtle and sustaining effects over a lifetime will prove infinitely more powerful and sustaining as your body feels better and better.

The Four-Week Addicted-to-Health Plan Summary

	Nutrition	Activity and Movement	Mindfulness and Meditation	Social/Relationships and Positive Emotional States
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ ↓ glycation and glycemic load ☆ ↓ insulin peaks/troughs ☆ ↓ inflammatory burden ☆ ↑ intake of healthy fats and carbohydrates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ ↑ conditioning ☆ ↑ strength/endurance ☆ ↓ weight reduction ☆ ↓ endorphins/↓ cortisol ☆ ↓ allostatic Load 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ ↓ stress, cortisol ☆ ↓ sympathetic (fight- flight) tone ☆ ↑ parasympathetic (calm) tone ☆ ↓ Stress (allostatic load) ☆ ↑ cognitive capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ ↑ relationship capital ☆ ↑ bonding ☆ leverage problem-solving, conflict management ☆ ↑ mood, positive emotions and support ☆ ↓ stress (allostatic load)
Health Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ ↓ cardiovascular risk ☆ ↓ risk of diabetes and metabolic (lifestyle syndrome) ☆ ↓ cancer risk ☆ ↓ risk of neurodegenerative diseases ☆ ↓ weight 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ ↓ cardiovascular risk ☆ ↓ cancer risk ☆ ↓ stress burden, pain ☆ ↑ mood, immune function ☆ ↓ concentration ☆ ↓ risk metabolic syndrome, diabetes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ ↓ cardiovascular risk, e.g., blood pressure, pulse/respirations ☆ ↑ mood, resilience ☆ ↑ patience, tolerance, compassion ☆ ↓ symptom management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ enhanced longevity ☆ ↓ symptoms of depression and anxiety ☆ ↑ resilience ☆ ↑ improved coping ☆ ↓ control, influence

The Four-Week Addicted-to-Health Plan Summary (Continued)

	Nutrition	Activity and Movement	Mindfulness and Meditation	Social/Relationships and Positive Emotional States
<p>Action Steps to target by Week 4</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ minimal high glycemic load foods, e.g., bread, pastries, bagels, chips, pretzels, sugared, sweetened soft drinks ☆ substitute whole-grain products for white flour/starches ☆ 6–9 servings per day of fruits/veggies, including legumes, lentils, soy products ☆ cruciferous vegetables, e.g., broccoli, asparagus, Brussels sprouts, kale, spinach, cauliflower ☆ healthy fats, e.g., skinless chicken and turkey, salmon, fish, avocado, walnuts, flaxseed ☆ avoid all trans and hydrogenated fats; minimize vegetable, safflower, corn oils ☆ avoid all fast food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ aerobic, e.g., walking, running for 30 minutes, 5 days/week ☆ resistance exercise, e.g., 12 reps for 20 minutes, 3 days/week ☆ dance to the music that makes you feel great, 20 minutes, 3 days/week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ 20–30 minutes of meditation, 3 days/week, e.g., prayer, relaxation response, paced respirations, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, etc. ☆ yoga once per week ☆ keep a gratitude journal ☆ spend time outdoors at least four times per week ☆ attend spiritual or religious worship, if so inclined, once a week ☆ avoid thinking about or doing work-related activities at least four evenings per week; strive for one work-free day per week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☆ volunteer in a meaningful activity ☆ join a social group ☆ resolve an important conflict ☆ watch a humorous video for 30 minutes, 3 days/week ☆ forgive a prior transgression ☆ cuddle with a significant other five minutes each day ☆ contact a person who has touched your life in a meaningful way to thank them

RETURN ON THE INVESTMENT (ROI) OF THE FOUR-WEEK ADDICTED-TO-HEALTH PLAN

- Improved physical conditioning
- Decreased weight
- Look better
- Improved self-esteem
- Enhanced mood, positive emotions
- Improved strength, endurance, flexibility, and balance
- Enhanced resilience
- Improved concentration
- Decreased illness/morbidity, age-related disease
- Reduced allostatic load or “stress response,” including decrease risk for cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, neurodegenerative (Alzheimer’s) diseases, and cancer
- Enhanced balance of parasympathetic systems (calm, protective) and sympathetic systems (fight-flight, stress-response)
- Improved immune function
- Longer life

TIME COMMITMENT FOR THE FOUR-WEEK ADDICTED-TO-HEALTH PLAN (PER WEEK, AT THE FOUR-WEEK MARK AND BEYOND)

Nutrition (variable if any)

Activity and Movement (270 minutes or 4.5 hours/week)

Mindfulness/Meditation (90 minutes or 1.5 hours/week)

Social/Relationship (variable: 120 minutes or 2 hours/week)

Total Time Commitment: 480 minutes or 8 hours/week (1 hour and 10 minutes per day)