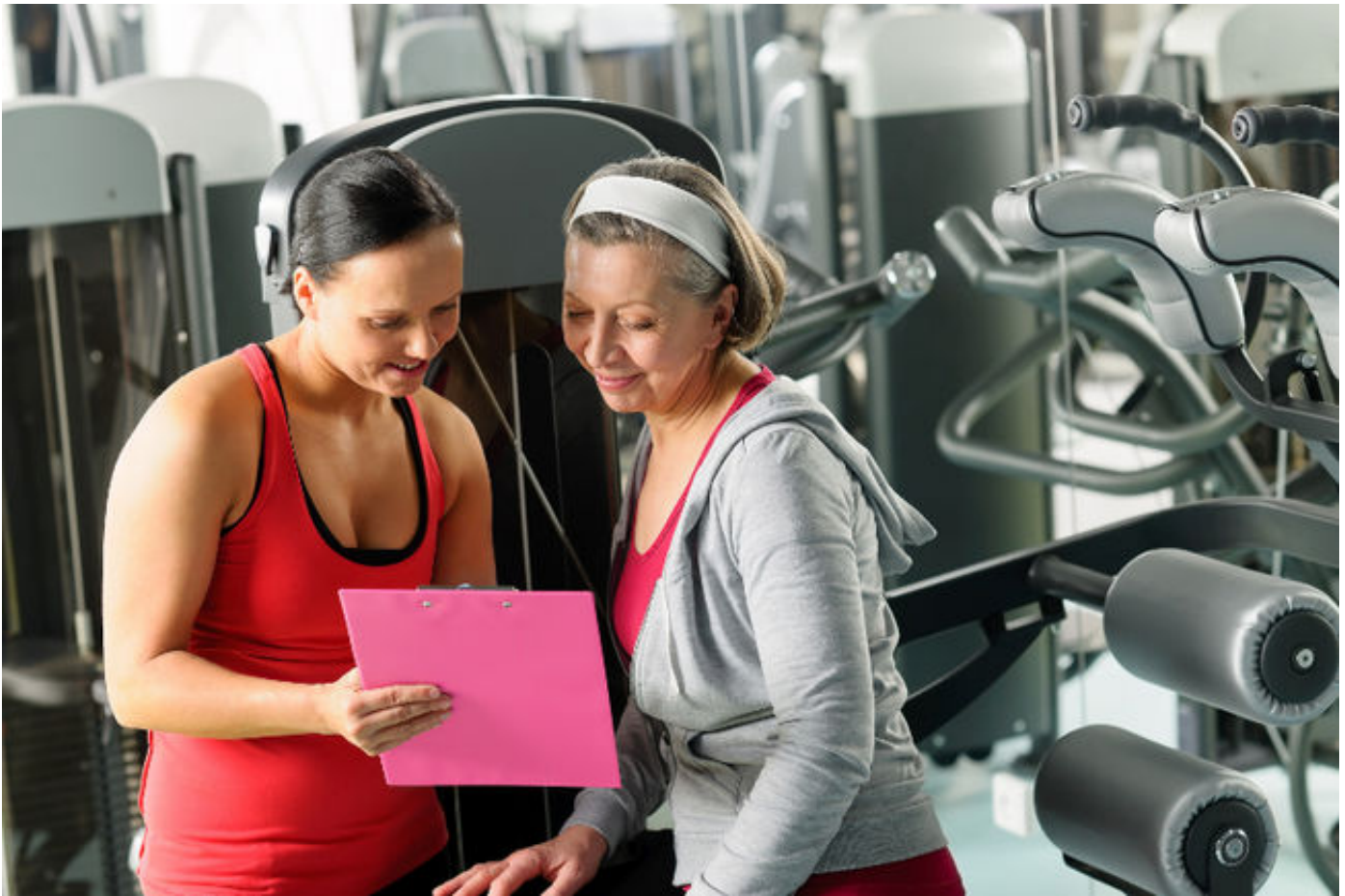

OPINION

Making new habits well worth the effort



By Melissa Carr, Special to 24 hours
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Whether deciding to eat healthier, exercise regularly, meditate, or floss daily, intentions might be good but sometimes old habits come into play and plans fly out the window.

Habits are things we do automatically, saving us brain power because they are often done unconsciously. Most of us don't need to think about brushing our teeth, we have an automated routine of doing so.

It's the same when we want to change our lives as adding new healthy habits is initially difficult, but once these changes are implemented into routine you don't need to use the energy-sapping efforts of willpower.

First, know why you want this change. Perhaps you have a health issue driving you, or maybe you have a goal of running a 10K race, of losing weight, or of getting a full restful night of sleep. The more important the goal is to you, the more likely you'll be successful.

Next, break that goal up into mini goals. For example, swap one junk food for something healthy, get to bed 15 minutes earlier than usual, or practice five minutes of deep-focused breathing. These mini goals are so easy that you are sure to succeed and you can up the ante.

When creating new habits, it can be easy to forget. Reminders can be in the form of tying the new habit to a regular habit. Practice deep breathing or meditation after brushing your teeth, or use reminder notes until the habit is routine — sticky notes in obvious locations such as your bathroom mirror or timed alarm reminders on your phone or tablet will do the trick.

Track your goals and mini goals. Put a gold star or an X on the calendar for each day that you accomplish your goal. You'll find that you'll be averse to breaking that string of successes.

Ask your friends and family to support you in your goals and keep them in the loop so they will help to keep you accountable. Maybe they'll even join in, making it more fun.

When making new healthy habits, know that acupuncture can help lower your stress and may help boost your resolve. It is also useful in reducing addictive cravings, such as smoking, drugs, alcohol or sugar.

Melissa Carr is a doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, caring for patients in an integrative medicine clinic in Vancouver.

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