

How to reward yourself (with no regrets)

Every now and then it's important to take your foot off the pedal, take stock of your achievements – or even your progress towards them – and reward yourself.

Go on! Give yourself a treat. Go to the beach, see that movie, get that pedicure. Whoever thought that rewarding yourself could be good for you? Well actually, it is ... if it's done in a positive and nurturing way that's right for you and your health.

So don't feel guilty for taking a moment for yourself – know that it's an important part of your health and happiness.

Let's look at how rewarding yourself in the right way can have a positive impact on your life.

Find a passion for self-compassion

While we live in a world of instant gratification – and most rewards certainly come with their dose of 'insta-happiness' – treating yourself to something special also plays a key role in a practice with longer lasting and deeper effects: the practice of 'self-compassion.'

At its core, self-compassion is about being kind to yourself. It's different from self-esteem, self-pity or self-indulgence. As Jean Hailes clinical psychologist Gillian Needleman explains, "Self-compassion is treating yourself with the same kindness and care that you would treat a friend. It's about being gentle, caring and non-judgemental of yourself, thinking of yourself as part of a larger humanity."

Making self-compassion part of your daily life can be challenging; however, as Ms Needleman tells us, the benefits can be transformative.

"Self-compassion and kindness are simple concepts, but are so difficult to practise consistently," she says. "Compassion is a gentle gesture, but when it becomes a regular part of the way you treat yourself, it can be such a powerful one. And remember, compassion shouldn't stop, even when you aren't 100% happy with something you've done."

Gear up for a positive cycle

While some of us think that we need to be hard on ourselves and cut out rewards to achieve our goals, research has shown that being kind to yourself does not lower your standards. In fact, self-compassion promotes good mental health and can actually help you to achieve your goals.

By rewarding yourself in the now, you are reinforcing positive behaviour. So not only are you celebrating and acknowledging what's happening in the present, you're also helping yourself along to more rewards and positive outcomes in the future. Sounds like a pretty great cycle!

But as with most things in life, rewarding yourself is all about balance; *how* you choose to reward yourself is an all-important consideration. Let's delve into ways that you can reward yourself that are positive, nurturing and fulfilling – in other words, treats that will make you feel good, not regretful!

Striking a balance

When we think of rewards, we may automatically think of favourite foods or drinks; dessert, pizza, chocolate, chips, milkshake, wine, champagne or a favourite cocktail. It's understandable, when so many of our celebrations are associated with eating and drinking!

But as we all know, eating too many of these types of treats, too often, is not going to improve your health or happiness levels; in fact, it will have the opposite effect.

Jean Hailes accredited practising dietitian Stephanie Pirotta agrees that, while avoiding all treat foods (also known as discretionary foods or 'sometimes' foods) is the best for our body, "this is not realistic and no fun!"

"A state of a happy medium that promotes positive mental health, having a good relationship with food and enjoying a balanced diet is the best result," says Ms Pirotta. "Let's face it, 'sometimes foods' can be yummy! It's all about moderation, for everything."

Ms Pirotta says physical activity levels are also key when it comes to discretionary foods.

"It's best to aim for the daily recommended amount of 30 minutes of moderate physical activity," she says. "If you are not meeting this on most days, it is best to keep discretionary foods to a minimum, with a maximum of one serve every few days, especially if you're actively wanting to lose weight."

If you are meeting your recommended activity levels, and not trying to lose weight, then 1-2 serves of 'sometimes' foods every few days is acceptable. Examples of one serve include:

- 2 scoops of ice-cream
- 5-6 small lollies
- 60g of fried hot chips
- 200ml of wine.

"However, every person is unique," says Ms Pirotta. "It's best to speak to an expert to really know how many serves of discretionary items are recommended for you to meet your goals and needs."

Go-to alternative rewards

So with all this in mind, it's a good idea to have some go-to alternative rewards up your sleeve, so you can keep the good times and benefits flowing, without the unhealthy drawbacks. Here are some suggestions:

- Take some 'time out', just for you
- Give yourself permission to take a nap
- Visit the library or bookstore for an afternoon all by yourself
- Get a babysitter for the kids and spend the time doing something just for you
- Pamper yourself, run a bath, do an at-home manicure/pedicure, light some candles
- Read a book
- Have a movie/Netflix marathon night
- Buy or pick yourself a bunch of flowers
- Be a tourist in your own town; visit the museum, the zoo, the gardens, the waterpark
- Take an annual leave day from work to do whatever you want!

Taking it back to basics

It's also important to realise that rewards can be as simple as thoughts. Ms Needleman recommends taking the time to recognise a “win on the inside”, even if it's a small one. “I call this practice ‘finding your inner cheerleader’, pom-poms and all!” she says.

“It's as simple as taking the time to actually notice that there are things you have achieved; ask yourself, what exactly was it that you did, what was the skill, what are you proud of, what does it say about you? All this adds important fuel to confidence and self-esteem building.”

So the next time you have a win – be it handing in an assignment, going for a walk, making it to work on time or just scraping through a tough week – find your inner cheerleader and pass her the megaphone! She deserves to be heard, loud and clear.

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