

BUILDING HABITS WITH PARKINSON'S DISEASE

A Guide for Patients and Caregivers

Note: This guide is for educational purposes. Always consult your healthcare provider for personalized medical advice.

Quick Summary

- Habits are automatic behaviors learned through repetition and rewards
- Parkinson's disease lowers dopamine, making habit formation harder
- People with PD often need conscious effort instead of 'autopilot'
- **Success strategies:** external cues, small steps, consistent timing, rewards
- Exercise and therapy improve brain function and dopamine use

Understanding Habits

What Are Habits?

Habits are actions we do regularly without much thought. Brushing your teeth before bed, making coffee in the morning, or reaching for your seatbelt when you get in the car—these are all habits. They form when we repeat an action so often that our brain starts doing it on 'autopilot,' saving mental energy for other tasks.

The Habit Loop

Our brains build habits through a three-part cycle:

1. **CUE** | A trigger that starts the routine (alarm, time of day, location)
2. **ROUTINE** | The action or behavior itself
3. **REWARD** | The benefit that makes your brain want to repeat it

Each time you repeat this loop, the brain releases dopamine—a chemical that helps you remember what felt good. Your brain's 'habit center' (basal ganglia) stores these patterns. Eventually, the cue alone triggers the whole routine automatically.

Habits vs. Motivation

Motivation is the spark that gets you started. Habit is the routine that keeps you going even when motivation fades. Think of motivation as wanting to exercise because you want to feel better, and habit as exercising every morning automatically—even on days you don't feel motivated.

How Parkinson's Affects Habits

The Dopamine Challenge

Parkinson's disease damages brain cells that produce dopamine. This creates two major challenges:

- **Low motivation (apathy):** Up to 40% of people with PD experience this. It's not laziness—it's biology. Tasks that used to be automatic now feel harder to start.
- **Weakened autopilot:** Actions that were once automatic (walking, dressing, hobbies) now require conscious thought. The brain's 'go' signal is weak.

What This Means in Daily Life

People with PD often experience:

- Difficulty starting movements (freezing, hesitation)
- Need for conscious focus on usually automatic tasks
- Reduced 'feel-good' response from activities
- Greater reliance on 'intentional' (deliberate) movement

Strategies for Building Habits with Parkinson's

While PD makes habit formation more challenging, it's absolutely possible with the right approach:

1. Start Small and Simple

- Set very small, achievable goals (5 minutes of exercise, not 30)
- Small successes build confidence and momentum
- Gradually increase once the basic habit feels natural

2. Use External Cues and Reminders

- Phone alarms for medication and activity times
- **Visual cues:** lay out exercise clothes the night before
- Pill organizers with alarms
- Sticky notes in key locations

3. Link to Existing Routines

'Habit stacking' makes new habits easier. Attach a new behavior to something you already do regularly:

- After your morning coffee → do stretching exercises
- After taking medication → practice voice exercises
- After lunch → take a short walk

4. Choose Your Best Time of Day

- Schedule important activities when you have the most energy
- Plan around when your medication works best
- Front-load your day before fatigue sets in

5. Use Intentional Techniques

Since automatic movements are harder, use conscious strategies:

- **Mental cues:** 'Big steps' or '3, 2, 1, go!'
- Visualization before starting an activity
- Counting or rhythm to maintain movement

6. Reward Yourself

Since internal dopamine rewards may be weaker, create external ones:

- Mark accomplishments on a calendar

- Enjoy favorite music only during exercise
- Call a friend after completing tasks
- Celebrate small wins—acknowledge your effort

7. Get Support

- Exercise with a friend or join a PD-specific class
- Share goals with family for encouragement
- Join support groups—community builds accountability
- Work with therapists (physical, occupational, speech)

Practical Examples

Example 1: Morning Stretching Routine

- **Goal:** Loosen muscles and improve mobility each morning
- **Cue:** Right after getting out of bed
- **Routine:** 5-minute stretch (neck rolls, shoulder shrugs, ankle circles)
- **Reward:** Favorite breakfast or tea, pleasant music during stretches
- **Tip:** Keep a printed stretch list on your nightstand

Example 2: Medication Timing

- **Goal:** Take medications on time, every time
- **Cue:** Meal times + phone alarms
- **Routine:** Take medication immediately when alarm rings
- **Reward:** Check off dose on chart, enjoy newspaper or game
- **Tip:** Use pill organizer by your coffee maker; seeing a week of checkmarks is satisfying

Example 3: Afternoon Walk

- **Goal:** Improve fitness, mood, and brain health
- **Cue:** Right after lunch + shoes in plain sight
- **Routine:** Short walk (even to driveway and back)
- **Reward:** Favorite music/audiobook during walk, check calendar after

- **Tip:** Walk with a friend some days for social enjoyment

Example 4: Voice Practice

- **Goal:** Maintain strong speech and swallowing muscles
- **Cue:** After brushing teeth (morning)
- **Routine:** Loud 'Ahh' sounds or read aloud with strong voice
- **Reward:** Thumbs up in mirror, fun tongue twister
- **Tip:** Keep exercise sheet on bathroom mirror; join weekly speech group

Important Reminders

- Consistency matters more than perfection—missing one day won't ruin progress
- **Be patient:** habits take weeks to months to form
- Apathy is a neurological symptom, not a character flaw
- Celebrate small wins and be kind to yourself
- Exercise is one of the best habits for PD—it helps the brain use dopamine better
- Involve family and caregivers—explain that you may need extra encouragement

Additional Resources

- **Michael J. Fox Foundation:** www.michaeljfox.org (lifestyle strategies)
- **Parkinson Voice Project:** parkinsonvoiceproject.org (motivation and speech therapy)
- **Local support groups:** Ask your neurologist or search online for PD groups in your area
- **Therapies:** Physical, occupational, and speech therapy can all help build routines

References

This guide is based on research from:

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parkinsonvoiceproject.org

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