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## Make your bed and bread: How simple routines can change your life

Some thrive on a routine, while others shudder at having a predictable schedule, but I find that during times of stress, maintaining structure helps us stay calm and in control

By Anjaly Thomas

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Admiral William McRaven famously spoke about the benefits of making one's bed. "It will give you a small sense of pride and encourage you to do another task and another and another."

My boarding school upbringing ensures that I make my bed and my transformation into an author ensures I keep my thoughts structured. I mean, you are unlikely to get far with getting your book written if you don't structure your thoughts, right?

The long and short of it being that life works well within a structure. True, some thrive on a routine, while others shudder at having a predictable schedule, but I find that during times of stress, maintaining structure helps us stay calm and in control.

## Combating uncertainty

A clinical psychologist and clinical director at the Human Relations Institute and Clinics, Dubai, Dr Thoraiya Kanafani, explains that the importance of a routine, as well as their levels, can differ depending on personal preferences, needs, and circumstances.

“Routines have the potential to improve both physical and mental well-being. They can help combat uncertainty and form realistic, achievable goals that may boost self-esteem and confidence. They can help incorporate healthy eating and sleeping habits, exercise, and self-care.”

She explains there are various factors that contribute to a lack of routine, such as difficulties and unforeseen life events. “Absence of a routine may exacerbate ar**Join thousands trading in optimum conditions with IC Markets | Sign up** example, the lack of energy or motivation may contribute to difficulties in setti**IC MARKETS | SPONSORED** overall well-being.”

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According to her, millennials and Gen Z in particular — have a varied attitude towards routines that depend on personal and familial factors. “However, they may be influenced by factors such as their growing connection to the digital world, increased awareness of the value of work-life balance, fondness for spontaneity and adventure as compared to previous generations. Also, their digital devices have become helpful in creating more structured systems for them.”

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## A sudden lack of structure

Dubai-based Moroccan professional boxer and co-founder of Go Total Wellness Abdelhakim Wahid says his background as a professional sportsperson helps him establish and maintain a routine.

“Having a structure that covers all areas of your life makes you feel grounded and implementing that structure makes it easy to track progress and helps with anxiety and depression,” he says.

When the pandemic threatened to throw him off balance, he says he tried to create a different routine to beat stress. “When people were getting depressed, divorced or overweight, I took to cooking healthy meals at home, doing extra hours working out at home, and helping people online who were struggling to create their own structures. All this helped greatly.”

He shows an easy way to create a structure. “Do an action for a minimum of six times, at the same time, in the same way. The brain creates a stronger and deeper path of the structure. A habit has three parts: trigger, routine and reward. So, you need to find your trigger.”

## Benefits of routine

“Rome was not built in a day,” says Dubai-based CEO of Car City Group, Nitin Shukla. He believes in the famous adage, because according to him, to attain success it is important to have a focus, a routine and a structure — be it to a thought or action. “This is where structuring comes to play,” he says and adds that structuring his day gives him a sense of self control, improves focus which leads to a greater chance of success.

“I don’t whip myself up when I cannot stick to a routine but getting back on track is the secret to success. Simply put, a routine can be as simple as having a cup of tea every morning, making your bed, working out in morning, something that sets the pace, which is most important. Complacency leads to chaos.”

Dubai-based business growth strategy coach, mentor and motivational speaker Ramona Da Gama outlines the horrors of not having a routine, even one as simple as waking up, showering, brushing or going to school/work.

“Now, imagine your children not following this. Chaos will ensue. So, a structured routine is the ordinary series of things that we do at a particular time. Predictable, repetitive routines are calming and help reduce anxiety. They also help you take control of your day and subsequently, your life,” she says.

“As a business growth strategy coach, it is imperative for my clients and me to have a structure to our strategy,” Ramona explains. “It is effective in reducing stress because things get done, we don’t procrastinate or get sidetracked.”

Born in Kenya, Ramona took to playing table tennis at a very young age and later won the World Table Tennis Championships in Beijing. The same year she sat her A level exam to get into college.

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“My structured routine with goals and objectives even in my formative years gave me a sense of direction,” she adds and explains how staying focused gives her time to relax and spend time with family and friends.

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“Routine is my blueprint for success. Everything falls apart in the absence of one. Clearly, a structured routine is our secret to a happy life.”

### Here's how routines can benefit relationships:

- Brings a sense of stability
- Creates stronger bonds
- Greater commitments
- Meaningful quality time
- Helps calm an anxious mind

### Impact on mental health:

*Research shows that routines play an important role in mental health and better management of stress and anxiety. Having a regular routine can help to:*

- Lower stress levels

A common concern faced by most people, when, for example they lose their jobs and move to a new country, etc., is the challenge of forming a new routine, says Dr Kirin Hilliar, assistant professor of psychology at Heriot-Watt University, Dubai. "That move can affect their mood and their productivity. However, on a personal level, I find that when I slip up on my routine, particularly exercising, my energy levels get impacted, leading to a lack of focus, an inclination towards sugary, fatty foods for instant energy and disturbed sleep cycle."

She refers to James Clear's Atomic Habits in which he talks about starting small and building slowly. "Willpower is like a muscle — you need to exercise it day-by-day. If we use exercise as an example, start with simply getting to the gym and walking on the treadmill for 5 minutes. Then build it up over time."

"Study shows that most people, when they aren't doing so well, start to prioritise good habits and when things take off, they slip into complacency. It is important to remember that fact that you're feeling OK is a testament to the efficacy of these habits, rather than an indicator that you no longer need to maintain them."

She explains that when it comes to maintaining habits, it's not so much about age, but about external factors that might be generating structure on their behalf.

"For instance, university students often find it challenging to establish their own routines but in school, every hour of the day is accounted for. In both cases it is essential to help students establish a structure."

Another factor that prevents one from following a structure is perhaps the size of the family. "The bigger the family, the less chances of maintaining a healthy routine or habit. In contrast, living alone creates a higher level of self-initiated responsibility to maintain healthy habits."

## Make your bread

My dad loved bread. A good bread, he often said, was like tasting the universe. So, when I started baking during the pandemic, I remembered that reference to the divine and vowed to bake the perfect one. I was fascinated by the process of making of sourdough starter. For eight days on the allotted time, I measured and poured and stirred until three attempts later (totaling 24 days, no less), I finally arrived at the perfect starter — with its classic nail paint smell and eventually ended up with a delightful little sourdough. Now, if I don't bake my bread, my little heaven explodes.

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Such is the power of habit.

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## Chat with KT: Which is the best habit you picked up in 2023?

*We asked the newsroom to share the best habits they picked up this year, here's what they said...*

"The best habit I picked up this year was making an effort to prepare my husband's lunch box everyday. As a working parent, I realised I had not been doing that for so many years. It may feel like I'm too busy to do these things but it is the simple things that matter the most." — Kirstin Bernabe

"Get up every morning as early as possible and either read or go to the gym. It has helped me start my day in a more positive frame of mind." — Michael Jabri-Pickett

"I used to have a habit of practising meditation but then I got away from it for a couple of years. This year I picked it back up and I've realised that it really grounds me and helps me tackle my day so much better." — Karen Ann Monsy

"I decided to become consistent with working out. It has brought in a lot of discipline in my life. It makes me happier and gives me mental clarity." — Husain Rizvi

"This year, I started eating healthier and became more mindful of what I put into my system." — Suresh Pattali

"The best habit I picked up this year is waking up at 6am every day to go to the gym before I start work. It gives me so much more time in the day and I start with a different energy." — Yasmine Mustafa

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