# Mindset for Successful Reversal

Read it before the workbook, or after it as a quick review

*A plan only works if you keep following it: the frame of mind that keeps you steady, and the choices that make it easier.*

## 1 Tactics and strategies

No diet removes the need for effort: expect hard days, wobbles and fading motivation. But you don't have to win a willpower contest all day. You can arrange your spaces and days so the right actions happen by **default** and the wrong ones take effort. A **strategy** is your big-picture approach, such as limiting daily calories. A **tactic** is what you do in the moment, such as at bedtime, hungry, staring into the fridge. Your personality shapes which strategies suit you.

## 2 Moderator or abstainer?

For a **moderator**, a small planned portion of a favourite food settles the urge. For an **abstainer**, the first bite flips a switch and the food stays on their mind. The test: how much mental noise follows a small taste? Getting this wrong looks like a willpower problem when it is really a **strategy–temperament mismatch**. Most people are a mix, moderators with some foods and abstainers with others, and neither is a moral failing.

| Situation | Moderator | Abstainer |
|---|---|---|
| Treat offered | “Just a small piece.” | “If I start, I'm in trouble.” |
| After one bite | “That was enough.” | “That woke something up!” |
| After a slip | “Back on plan now.” | “Day ruined. Monday, then.” |

Moderators do best with **planned moderation**: specific, pre-set limits, such as dessert once a week on Saturday. “I'll just be sensible” is not a plan, and without specifics “sometimes” drifts into “often”. Abstainers do best with **bright red lines**: clear rules such as keeping trigger foods out of the house, no snacking between meals, and alcohol only on planned occasions. Once the rule exists, the daily bargaining stops. The abstainer's trap is that one slip feels like total failure, so they need a calm, pre-set **recovery routine**.

## 3 Fix your food environment

Willpower is least reliable when you need it most: tired, stressed, bored or lonely. Your **food environment** doesn't have bad days. Remove **friction** from good choices and add it to poor ones. Take trigger foods out of the house, rather than testing yourself with them at the back of the cupboard. Keep fruit visible, freeze meals for tired evenings, keep rescue foods ready and pre-portion nuts or chocolate into small bags. Then find the two or three places where your plans usually collapse (the canteen, the sofa after the children's bedtime) and decide in advance what you will do instead.

## 4 Internal and external saboteurs

The **internal saboteur** is the voice saying “just this once”, “the day's gone anyway”, “you deserve a treat” or “this is too hard”. It isn't your enemy; it just puts comfort now ahead of your long-term goals. Learn to recognise it, so you can observe what it says rather than obey it, and prepare answers while your head is cool. The **external saboteur** is the person who keeps offering food, says “one won't hurt” or “you're no fun any more”. Plan friendly, brief replies, such as “I'm focusing on my health at the moment”, and repeat them calmly if pushed: the **broken record technique**. With someone close, a private conversation about what you need often helps. Margaret reshaped her evening wine-and-biscuits habit (smaller glass, savoury crackers, low-alcohol wine, her own fridge shelf) and asked her husband for support. Without counting a calorie, her HbA1c fell from 6.1% to 5.1% (43 to 32 mmol/mol) in a year.

## 5 Failure is a habit, so success can be learned

Most eating is habit, formed through a **habit loop**: a **cue** (sitting down in the evening) triggers a **routine** (fetching chocolate), which brings a **reward** (pleasure and comfort). Giving in to a craving brings instant, certain relief, so each time it deepens the groove: the **crave-cave cycle**. Holding out brings no instant reward, just a fading urge. Repeated often enough, this can feel like **learned helplessness**. But habits form through repetition: giving in wins the single moment, while holding out wins over the series. Albert Bandura showed that **self-efficacy**, your belief that you can do something, grows most from **mastery experience**, actually succeeding. So early discomfort is the **training stimulus**, not a sign the plan is wrong. In practice: spot your main cues, use **habit substitution** (keep the cue, swap the routine, such as a brisk walk instead of a snack) and expect the early weeks to be hard. Motivation comes and goes like a wave, so rely on repetition instead.

## 6 Reward execution over outcome

**Outcome rewards** (“a treat when I lose ten pounds”) are delayed, uncertain and can turn into reward-eating. **Execution rewards** celebrate the behaviour itself, today: you took the walk, you closed the kitchen on time. Keep measuring, but **track outcomes for information and execution for reward**. Mark kept commitments on a calendar with ticks, never red crosses, and avoid the brittle **perfect streak**: five good days out of seven can count as a good week. The real skill is **wobble management**: after a miss, take the very next shot. Each kept promise also adds to your **identity** as someone who already does this.

## 7 Success and failure both love company

Plans rarely collapse in one go; they **drift**. Small **hinge points**, such as starting the warm-up or preparing tomorrow's lunch when tired, stop the drift early. Sharing your plan helps too. A review of 65 studies and 24 smaller reviews found peer support in diabetes improved glucose, weight and health behaviours, especially once motivation faded after a few weeks. Choose a kind, steady, direct **accountability buddy** for a short weekly check-in on results, wins, misses and next week's commitments.

## 8 Write your plan down, and share it wisely

Writing forces you to be specific: not “I'll exercise more”, but “resistance session, Tuesday and Thursday, 7am, living room”. Clear enough that anyone could check. Then add **implementation intentions**, if–then plans made with a cool head: “If I get home too late to cook, I'll eat a freezer meal.” “If I eat off-plan, I'll return to the plan at the next meal.” A 2025 analysis by Sheeran and colleagues, covering 642 tests, found if–then plans improve follow-through, including for healthy eating and exercise.

## 9 Drop all-or-nothing thinking

**All-or-nothing thinking** treats one slip as total failure: one bad meal becomes “the day's ruined”, which becomes “the week's ruined”. The **fresh start** is always next Monday, a horizon that moves away as you approach. It feels like action but asks nothing of you now. Build a new reflex instead: **protect what remains**. If lunch went badly, protect dinner. Learn from the slip without blame: self-criticism is not recovery. Only returning to the plan is.

## 10 Mindfulness helps

Stripped of hype, **mindfulness** practice widens the gap between an urge and the action. “I need something sweet” becomes “an urge for something sweet has appeared”, and that leaves room to choose. It may also improve **interoceptive awareness**, noticing signals from inside your body, so you can tell real hunger from eating out of boredom, anxiety or habit. It can modestly ease stress. Simple, well-tested sitting meditation is enough, with no new beliefs required.

### JOINING IT UP

Know your temperament, shape your surroundings, plan ahead, reward the doing, recover at the next meal, and let repetition turn effort into habit and identity.



Bold words are new terms from the chapter