

The 40-Day Challenge: How Doing Just One New Thing a Day Transformed My Life

By Jill Smolinski

A few years ago I gave myself an unusual challenge: Every day for 40 days, I vowed to do one thing, however small, that, 1) I'd never done before, 2) was scary, or 3) was a treat just for *me*. I hoped it would energize my life, and I was right—it did, and more than I could have ever imagined. During that brief “jump start,” amazingly, I sold my first novel, confronted my fear of heights by going up in a helicopter, and enjoyed a host of “firsts”: my first pedicure, first motorcycle ride, and my first (and I'll admit *last*) taste of brussels sprouts.

I came up with the idea because I was simply in a rut. Like so many women, I had gotten into a habit of putting everyone else first. I set aside my own dreams for “later” and, pretty soon, my life was a series of obligations and chores and errands—and not much fun. But I didn't want a whole new life...just to shake up the one I already had.

By making a point of doing one new thing a day—which some days took mere minutes—I felt more aware, more awake and more alive in all aspects of my life.

Want to Give It a Try? Some Tips for Success:

1. Consider setting a specific timeframe. If there's a clear beginning and end, you'll be more likely to stay on track. I chose 40 days, but even a week can give you a boost.
2. Document your progress by jotting down what you do each day.
3. Start with something small and easy to get started. If you hold off until you can begin with a bang, you may never do it at all. For my first day, I merely substituted my regular yoga class with Bikram yoga (in which the room is heated to 110 degrees). It may not seem like much of a change, but—after an hour of sweating and trying not to faint or throw up from the heat—I definitely felt I'd tried something new. (And believe it or not, I've done it again since.)
4. Keep a brainstorm list. When an idea for an activity comes to you, write it down. There will be days when opportunity seems endless...and days when you can't think of a thing to do. In addition to fun things like “see a play” or “try snowboarding,” stockpile easy-to-do suggestions for when time is tight, such as trying a new pizza topping, donating to charity or buying yourself a treat.
5. Involve other people. You'll be amazed how much support will come your way when you ask for it. I was able to get a free helicopter ride after telling a traffic reporter friend about my 40-day experiment, which would have never happened if I'd kept things to myself. Plus, with people checking in on your progress, you'll be less likely to quit.
6. Do a mix of things. Change your hairstyle. Dabble in a hobby. Taste an unusual

fruit. Order something different at your favorite restaurant. Try a new sport. Try a 24-hour fast. Turn off the lights and get by with candlelight. Pamper yourself. Learn something. Teach something. Splurge. Take the bus to work instead of driving. Ask your mom about her childhood and really listen to her answer. Take a risk. Take a bubble bath. Talk to people in the elevator. Dance. Hold a snake. Finish the sentence, “I’m not the type of person who would…” and then do whatever it is you’d never do.

7. Recognize that it won’t always be easy. You may have days when you want to revert to your usual routine. Try to ride it out—even if what you do that day is less than inspiring. One day, I simply drove past the gym and wrote down, “blew off my workout” as my task. And it was fine. The next day I was back on task with plenty of enthusiasm.

8. Accept that some days will be duds. I tried to check out the farmer’s market near work on my lunch hour and got lost—only to return, unsuccessful, and stuck with a fast food lunch. I wrote down, “accidentally explored downtown Los Angeles” and called it a day.

9. Don’t set up too many rules. The more flexible you are, the more likely you’ll enjoy the process and stick with it.

10. Lastly, dare to dream big. Momentum is an amazing force, and it can pay off in ways you can’t conceive. Case in point: Fifteen days into my 40, my “new thing” for the day was to recommit myself to a novel I’d written that I’d started to doubt would ever get published. On that day, I reread it, hoping that with a new critical eye I could find the flaws that were keeping it from selling. Instead, I found that I still liked it. I still believed in it. Four days later, my agent called: it had sold. My first novel, *Flip-Flopped*, was published in the U.S. and two other countries, and my second, *The Next Thing On My List*, (April 2007) will be published in 10 countries. I’ll never know if my 40-day experiment is why this happened—but at least I’d crawled far enough out of my rut to enjoy it when it did.

Reproduction of this information is encouraged with the following credit: Jill Smolinski is the author of the novels *Objects of My Affection* and *The Next Thing on My List*; visit her at jillsmolinski.com