

The challenge of 30-day challenges

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By Jamie Etheridge

During Ramadan, the greatest 30-day challenge is that of fasting and prayer. For fasters, this month is both rewarding and difficult as they must still carry on with their daily lives, work and responsibilities.

Aside from the spiritual, Ramadan also gives people an opportunity to chisel away at bad lifestyle habits and inculcate new, healthy ones. I planned to use the shortened work hours during Ramadan and the overall slowed down pace of life to learn a new skill and complete a 30-day challenge for self-improvement.

Sadly, my plans did not work out. This first week I have started and stopped three separate 30-day challenges.

First up, a friend gifted me a book - Learn to sketch in 30 days - and I thought this would be perfect for Ramadan. I set out wholeheartedly, sketching for four days every evening after iftar. But on the fifth day we went out and I totally forgot to sketch.

Scratch challenge #1.

For the second challenge, I decided to do 30 days of running. I suffered a hip injury last summer and have spent the better part of a year recovering. But feeling fine, I decided to jump back into it. Day one and I totally bailed. I never even made it to the gym. The first day of fasting turned out to be so stressful that I ended up sick in bed for the whole weekend. I did work in a few runs and swims in the week but sadly did not meet the goals of the challenge.

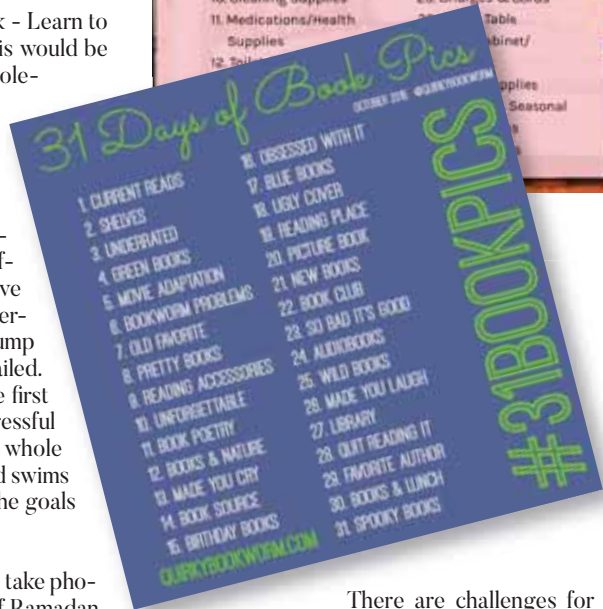
Challenge #2 = fail!

My third 30-day challenge was to take photos every day for the entire month of Ramadan. A friend sent me an article about the benefits of 30 day photo challenges, how they improve your mood and are good for mindfulness and reducing stress. I thought, 'Great!' and immediately agreed to do it. But the first day of Ramadan didn't turn out like I expected and I completely forgot about the idea.

Challenge #3 - fail.

So far in my challenge category, I'm 0/3. Not really a promising start for what are often pitched as the most popular and positive way to build new, healthy habits.

Thirty day challenges are the Internet Age's answer to the perpetual problem of self-improvement. Since the first Jane Fonda workout video or the publication of Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People, we have turned to self-improvement as a legitimate, reasonable way to change our lives and lifestyles. The adage 'you are what you do every day' is especially powerful when it comes to building habits of mind and activity.



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The 30-day challenges have the added benefit of being particularly Instagrammable. We can easily combine 30 days of photos to create a 1 minute video and show our progress, not to mention that the 30-day challenge's daily challenge itself provides excellent photo opportunities.

But the reality is that 30-day challenges come with their own unique set of 'challenges'. Firstly, most adults work full time and often have to squeeze in their 'challenge' in the limited free time they enjoy on nights and weekends.

Second, if you are a parent, forget about having any free time on nights and weekends. My nights and weekends are booked solid taking my children to tuitions or playdates, running errands, cooking and shopping or simply spending quality time with the family.



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| Day 1: Name | Day 16: Something old |
| Day 2: Outdoors | Day 17: Inspiring |
| Day 3: Shadow of anything | Day 18: Black and white |
| Day 4: Favourite colour | Day 19: Clouds |
| Day 5: What I ate | Day 20: Trees |
| Day 6: From a distance | Day 21: In motion |
| Day 7: Sunset | Day 22: Fav memory |
| Day 8: Chocolate | Day 23: Any animal/bird |
| Day 9: Flowers | Day 24: Random |
| Day 10: What u are wearing | Day 25: Purchased |
| Day 11: Faceless self-portrait | Day 26: Small object |
| Day 12: Scene 4m a window | Day 27: Building |
| Day 13: Technology | Day 28: Treasured item |
| Day 14: 5 facts about you | Day 29: Sunglasses |
| Day 15: Sky | Day 30: A smile |

Third, the entire point of the 30-day challenge is to help you overcome a bad habit by replacing it with a good one. Switching sitting on the couch for running, for example. Or drawing every day rather than binge-watching Netflix.

But our bad habits exist for a reason. I personally am no fan of TV and do not like to waste time watching it or letting my kids watch it. But sometimes my brain is so exhausted from a long and stressful week. The only thing I have the energy left to do is plop down on the sofa, perhaps pick up a bit of knitting and veg out to old episodes of Friends.

This is not me at my ideal self.

But on a Thursday night after a busy week, sick kids, deadlines and dealing with Kuwait traffic is anyone at their ideal self?

Fourth, bad habits are linked in a concatenated chain of behaviors. Changing one habit is difficult, if not impossible, without changing all those connected to it. For example, someone wants to start running daily. To do that, they need to book a time to run. Let's say the morning. But in the morning breakfast must be made and the kids got ready for school and if the person gets up an hour earlier - let's say 4:30am rather than 5:30am - then they will have to also go to bed earlier to compensate, which means less time to do other things in the evenings like spend quality time with a spouse or work a second, part time job or bake cookies for the kids to take to class the next day.

Each change requires adjustments all along the chain of activities and that is not always taken into account when adopting a new habit or taking on a 30-day challenge.



So the result is failure.

Repeated and disheartening failure. Not the result most of us who take on 30-day challenges were hoping for. And the failure hurts. It can be embarrassing if we've foolishly followed all the internet advice that says 'inform all your friends of your goals to help you stick with them'.

Failure also undermines confidence and the belief that we can take up new habits and change our lives for the better.

True failure is a part of trying and sometimes the process itself can be rewarding. I failed at all three of my planned 30-day challenges this month. But I learned some really valuable lessons including how to understand and manage my time more realistically, how to set SMARTer, more realistic goals (working out daily is impossible, for example but I can likely manage three times a week).

Now the challenge is to figure out how to design a 30-day challenge tailored for my lifestyle and current time constraints. Maybe we need an Every-Other-Day-Challenge or perhaps an Only-On-The-Weekends-Challenge. Or even better, how about a I'm-Great-The-Way-I-Am-Challenge, that one sounds easy but trust me, it's the hardest one of all.