

Behavior Change: Part 2_Weeks 3-4

I hope you now have the theoretical basis for picking one good habit and have also exercised your patience muscles a bit. Let's dive into developing good habits.

DEVELOPING GOOD HABITS

To overcome the habit trap, you'll need a well-thought-out approach. Recall the three parts of the habit cycle: cue, action and reward. Dismantling a habit will need creatively influencing each of these three aspects, while keep it simple.^{1,2}

1. Minimize Cue Exposure

Work on the triggers (cues) that launch the behavior. Decrease the old cues in your life. For example, with smoking, decrease the time you spend with buddies who smoke or who goad you to smoke, minimize conflicts and other stressful situations, and eliminate the breaks in your calendar that you had assigned to smoking.³ Sometimes a change in life situation, such as relocation or a new job, provides the perfect opportunity to remove the old cue and insert a new cue that guides you to a new behavior.⁴ Take advantage of that opportunity. Also, when you choose a new cue, pick something that you experience most days in your normal daily life. For example, connect flowing water in the tap with blessings coming into your home. Connect your first awareness in the morning with the word *gratitude*. Trash a few negative thoughts the day you empty the trash can. You can't eliminate all the negative thoughts, but you can choose to smile at them and let them go with gratitude, knowing that they too served a purpose.

2. Create Barriers for the Undesired Action

Increase the difficulty of smoothly executing the habitual behavior. For example, eating with the nondominant hand can decrease the caloric intake.⁵ A close cousin of mine had all the good intentions to quit smoking but was failing. I asked him to keep the cigarette packet in a sacred place (behind the image of a deity in his home). The trick worked. He is abstinent for the last five years.

3. Find Alternate Ways to Get the Same Reward

Try to replace the behavior with something else that gives you the same reward. In the case of smoking, the reward of relaxation can be attained by deep breathing, talking to a trusted friend, listening to music, coloring, watching a short video, going for a walk, taking a short nap, writing creatively, practicing tai chi or yoga, or doing something else that makes sense to you. Try to pick an activity that is simple, short, doable, and pleasant.

Make sure the new behavior helps you save time and is easy. Otherwise you won't be able to sustain it. Sometimes creative changes in the context may help. Changing plate sizes, lighting, layout, color, and convenience can all help you change what and how much you eat.⁶

As you plan behavior change, here are some additional insights that might help.

Get accustomed to change

Train your muscle of intentionality. **Do things differently so you become comfortable with trying new things.** Take a new route to work, park on a different floor, rearrange your furniture, try a new restaurant, listen to a completely different kind of music, or eat a new cuisine with your nondominant hand. Also, exercise self-control in little daily activities. Sit for no more than an hour at a stretch, skip dessert, say no to seconds, avoid parking at the closest ramp. Sprinkling self-control throughout the day will help you strengthen the willpower muscle so you can resist more sinister temptations. In this world filled with "supernormal" stimuli, against which our senses are defenseless once exposed (think doughnuts or porn),⁷ living with intentionality guided by your values and creating a distance between you and such stimuli will help shield you from the myriad attractants.

Repetition

Repeat the new behavior until your brain forms fresh connections that automatically host it. There isn't a magic number of thirty, sixty, or two hundred days for which the behavior should be repeated for it to become habitual. It is individual. It'll be good to remember that the old circuits in the brain won't disappear. You'll have to monitor with diligence to avoid slipups that can lead back to old patterns.⁸

Meaning

Perhaps most importantly, add meaning to the change. I remember a grandma who told me the story about her smoking. She had smoked for fifty years and had failed every treatment. One day, she leaned forward to kiss her four-year-old grandson. He took two steps back and said, "Grandma, you stink." That was the day. She stopped smoking so she could kiss her grandson. Add a deeper meaning to your behavior change. That'll give you strength in your weaker moments.⁹ Change inspired by meaning and love lasts much longer.

Simple and Pleasant

Keep it simple and pleasant. The simpler and easier the change and the greater the pleasure it gives, the more likely you will be able to sustain it.

Let's now commit to a new good habit.

Start with picking one aspect of life you wish to change. It could be what you eat, exercise, sleep, prolonged sitting, needless multitasking, procrastination, too much news, or something else. Be as specific as possible. For example, instead of saying I will improve my diet, state that I will cut down my soda intake from five cans a day to one can a day.

Step 1: Pick one aspect of your life you commit to change. Be very specific. Start with something simple.

This week, I commit to...

Step 2: Decrease cue exposure: Think about how you will create a physical separation between you and the chemical/agent/situation. Pick situations/people who steer you to engage in the unhealthy behavior. Think of how you will avoid them.

This is how I will place a barrier between me and the chemical/agent/situation:

Step 3: Decrease the effect of cue exposure: Think about how you will prevent the cue from launching the unhealthy behavior.

This is how I will decrease the effect of 'high-risk' situations:

Step 4: Find alternate ways to get the same reward: Think about how you can find the same pleasure/relaxation that you would otherwise get with the previous habit.

This/these are some of the alternate ways I will find pleasure/relaxation that I previously experienced with the agent:

I hope with the foregoing you have a concrete plan for picking one good habit. Let's give it a roll!

References

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This document is adapted from Dr. Sood's book, Mindfulness Redesigned for the Twenty-first Century.