

Behavior Change: Part 2_Weeks 1-2

Part 1 provided you the scientific basis of some of the most important topics in behavior change: Self-control, Impatience, and Habits. We will now apply those insights into developing self-control, patience, and good habits.

DEVELOPING SELF-CONTROL AND PATIENCE

In the first two weeks of our practice we will focus on developing self-control and patience.

An interesting study compared patience between two monkey species—marmosets and tamarins.¹ Both these monkeys have comparable body and brain sizes, mating systems, and life-history trajectories. By all measures, their levels of patience should be similar. Investigators assessed how long a delay monkeys will tolerate, the point beyond which they won't wait to get the six pellets but instead will eat the two pellets available right away. That wait time was about eight seconds for tamarins and almost fifteen seconds for marmosets—a large difference that can't be explained by their evolutionary development or biology. What made the marmosets a role model of patience? The answer came from their eating habits.

Tamarins are mostly insectivorous—they have to act fast to catch moving prey. Marmosets are mostly gummivorous—they punch holes in trees and then sit around as though watching a long worldwar II documentary, waiting for the gum to exude. This difference in feeding habits translated into a difference in patience.¹

I find this hopeful because it means that if we live more thoughtfully, we can strengthen the patience muscles. The more you choose patience, the greater your patience will be. **Once you create the patience habit, the patience habit will create you.**

Here is a three-step process to cultivate patience.

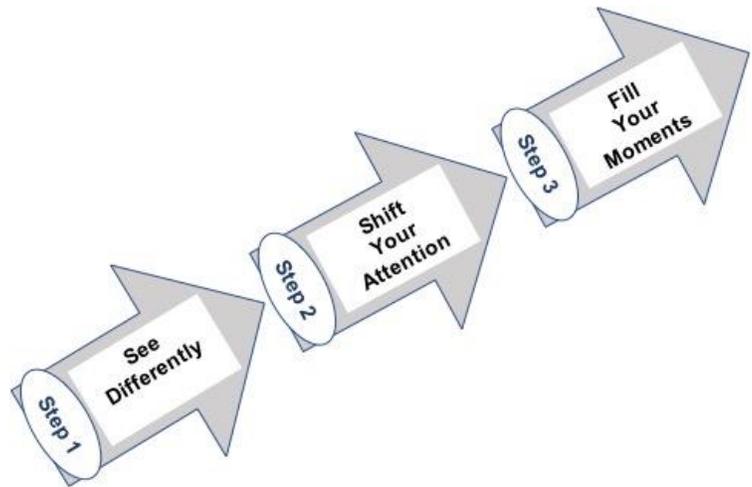
Step 1: See Differently

Give your mind a little workout by choosing to see the annoying differently. Your creative mind can find infinite perspectives and coat a sour experience with sweet wrappers.

For example, a gentleman I met had multiple work responsibilities and was constantly interrupted. The

nature of his job was such that interruptions were inevitable. After a good discussion, he started looking at interruptions as an essential part of his job. He considered that he went to work to be interrupted. Now he approaches the interruptions rather than withdrawing from them. This shift in perspective has decreased his stress level and that of his colleagues and has made him much more effective at work.

Similarly, looking at eating as a spiritual exercise and feeling grateful for the food and its preparers is likely to increase the joy in eating. Remember that what you eat will be a part of you for the rest of your life. So, carefully choose your options and partake them with respect, giving your food the attention and love it deserves.



Step 2. Shift Your Attention

An airplane is much easier to brake when it has just started on the runway. After a critical speed, technically called V1, the captain is committed to a takeoff. The same applies to our mind as we fall in the trap of the “sinfully” pleasing.

Looking at a donut fifty feet away from the corner of your eyes is the early stage. Once you are up close and personal, and can smell the trans fat, you have reached V1. I find it easiest to shift my attention at an early stage. Shifting attention needs two things – a strong attention and an alternate anchor of attention. We have already discussed ways you can strengthen your attention. In research studies, trained attention is shown to increase patience.² You cannot, however, leave your attention anchorless. That is why shifting attention needs an alternate, more intentional focus, by filling your moments with an experience you can savor.

Step 3: Fill Your Moments

If you do not wish to reach V1 with donut or other sensory treats, take your attention

toward something else, and not just away from the donut.³ It could be mindfully examining an apple in the fruit section, noticing your loved one's eyes, looking at hairstyles of all the people in the grocery store, pausing to listen to all the sounds around you, or taking in the fragrance of the ripe mangoes. It could even be counting your next ten breaths or remembering your faith. The key is to intervene early and redeploy your attention to something that will engage you until the urge passes.

Some other ideas at the grocery checkout line include: listening to the random clicks of the scanner; noticing the items the person ahead of you has bought (The average person samples a miniscule percentage of the forty thousand items carried in an average grocery store. Noticing others' carts will be educational and amusing.); silently wishing people around you well; feeling grateful for the breadth of the items available for sale; bringing a smile to your eyes; noticing all the colors in your environment; and more.

Two additional ideas about cultivating patience are to sprinkle moments of patience in daily life and be patient with your patience.

A Daily Dose of Patience

Insert intentional delays (that you can afford) during the day. Train your mind to get used to emptiness and a slower pace. Here are a few ideas:

- Prepare a hot meal from scratch.
- Wait until every family member is at the table before taking the first bite.
- Chew your food well.
- Enjoy every sip of your coffee.
- Assemble your own furniture or toys.
- Stand in the longer line at the checkout.
- Drive in the slower lane.
- Iron your clothes.
- Load the dishwasher as though it were a jewelry box.
- Slowly peel your orange or apple.
- Play tennis with a five-year-old.
- Plant a garden and watch it grow.
- Delay checking your e-mails after your flight lands.
- Let children take the lead in which game to play.
- Listen with no desire to speak (listening isn't waiting to speak).
- Do not jump the yellow light.

Sprinkling moments of patience during daily life—during a meal, with a child, at the traffic light, in a meeting—can build your patience muscles. Resist the urge to jump the yellow light, wait until everyone is seated at the table before starting to eat, listen with

patience, watch slower-paced TV shows, or pick another idea that makes the most sense to you.

Patient with Patience

Just as biking progresses from training wheels to a small bike and then a bigger bike, your patience will play out in three domains of life in increasing order of difficulty: daily hassles, interpersonal affairs, and life hardships. It will be extremely difficult to embody perfect patience if your basement has flooded with storm water. Start with something simple.

Consider being a perfectly patient driver on Monday, a perfectly patient parent on Tuesday, a perfectly patient spouse on Wednesday, and a perfectly patient employee/employer on Thursday. On Friday, be perfectly patient with yourself. Give yourself a break on Saturday and Sunday (you might be exhausted by then!).

As a next step, work out your patience muscle with someone who currently gets on your nerves. It could be a colleague who slurps while drinking coffee, a teenager who likes to shower only once a week, a spouse whose snores risk cracking your home's foundation, or a neighbor who doesn't believe in recycling. Pick only one person and if you wish, promise patience only for one day of the week. Gradually work your way up.

You will reach a point with these perspectives and practices at which your worldview will change. You will be calmer, deeper and will have more headspace. In addition to seeing others' imperfections, you'll start seeing their constraints. You will become more compassionate.

Most importantly, be patient with yourself. I am reminded of an interesting expression: "God give me patience...but please hurry up." It takes time to build the patience habit—or, for that matter, any habit, to which we turn next. Let's now commit to the practice of patience.

Pick one part of the day where you are impatient:

Step 1: Pick a moment during the day when you are impatient
I am most impatient when...

Step 2: Think about where you can shift your attention at that time (you can think of several ideas here)

When I feel impatient, I will shift my attention to...

Step 3: Think of creative ways you can find greater joy in the new experience

When focusing on _____, this is what I will do to find greater joy:

That's your patience plan for now. Let's commit to implementing it this week!

References

1. Stevens JR, Hallinan EV, Hauser MD. The ecology and evolution of patience in two New World monkeys. *Biology letters* 2005;1:223-6.
2. Murray J, Theakston A, Wells A. Can the attention training technique turn one marshmallow into two? Improving children's ability to delay gratification. *Behaviour research and therapy* 2016;77:34-9.
3. Mischel W, Ebbesen EB, Zeiss AR. Cognitive and attentional mechanisms in delay of gratification. *Journal of personality and social psychology* 1972;21:204-18.

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