

# Healthy Habits and Sticking to Them

## The Importance of Health-Related Behaviours

Health-related behaviours and associated health outcomes are of worldwide concern. The World Health Organization has published both strategy and guidance on diet, physical activity and health.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the New Zealand Ministry of Health has published eating, sleeping and activity guidelines which form the basis of educational campaigns to influence individual and public health outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Health-related behaviours are also a significant enabler of broader resilience, well-being, mental health, and work-related performance,<sup>3</sup> something that is of interest to military populations who aim to increase their level of operational effectiveness. Most of us don't need a lot of educating about this. Typically, we know what we should be doing when it comes to our health but struggle to actually meet our goals in these areas.

Having aspirational goals is not uncommon. Whether related to health-promoting behaviours or other work and leadership-related behaviours, having goals in order to improve is required to develop as a person. The beginning of a new year seems to make goals all the more salient for many people. This is a time when the news media seems brimming with articles claiming to assist with New Years' resolutions. Unfortunately, the reality doesn't often match up with the enthusiasm for change. It is widely documented that the majority of self-initiated behaviour change attempts are unsuccessful.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, there is a distinction between merely having a desired goal and enacting the behaviour required to achieve this goal. It seems odd to think that humans would engage in behaviour that is ultimately bad for them, but some insight into the mechanics of habit can help us to understand why goals do not always translate into the desired behaviour required to achieve them.

## The importance of habit

Mastering our day to day habits is key to achieving our longer term goals. Where goal driven behaviour is something we do on purpose – habit is something we do more automatically.<sup>5,6</sup> Habit becomes automatic as it is 'cued' by things in our environment (locations, people, and context) and sometimes by our own internal states (thoughts, feelings and sensations).<sup>7</sup> When it comes to mastering habit we need to make our desired behaviours more automatic and our undesired behaviours less habitual – bringing them under conscious control.

## Getting started with new behaviours – overcoming inertia

When it comes to resilience – being immersed in a wide range of rewarding activities is important. The problem is that when people feel less resilient they often don't feel like doing much (it's a bit of a chicken and egg problem). They might withdraw from things that they found previously rewarding such as exercise and social activities which can lead to a downward spiral. Unfortunately if we waited until we felt like doing things we might never get there. One of the most important ways of helping people who feel low is through a strategy called behavioural activation. This strategy helps

to reengage with life and get associated rewards to initiate an upwards spiral.<sup>1</sup> The first step is to make the connection between your mood and your activity more obvious – keep a diary for a week to find out what things are associated with better wellbeing. There might be connections that you were not aware of. The next step is to schedule some activities that will either be rewarding in and of themselves or give you a sense of accomplishment. If you are feeling low or there is significant inertia, it's best to start small and give yourself small wins that you can then build on.

## New healthy habits

People tend to underestimate how long it takes to create a new habit (in pop psychology land it's about 21 days). In reality it's a lot longer. In an influential study modelling habit formation over time, 96 volunteers chose a healthy behaviour they wanted to turn into a habit. The researchers measured how habitual their behaviour became. The study found that automaticity increases steadily over time until it reaches a plateau. The range of time it took for a behaviour to become automatic in this study was between 18 days, and a predicted end range of 254 days, with an average of 66 days.<sup>8</sup> The upshot of this study is that it takes far longer for deliberately practiced behaviours to become habitually repeated behaviours. It may also take much longer for more complex behaviours like exercising to become automatic, than for simple behaviours like drinking a glass of water at lunchtime. Importantly, this research underscores for us that relying on willpower alone is a strategy sure to fail along the long journey of habit creation. We need robust tactics in order to be able to sustain the many days of repetition necessary for our goal behaviours to become embedded into our daily repertoire of healthy habits.

One intervention which aims to make habits more automatic is a strategy called *implementation intentions*. This means that you decide in advance what you are going to do in a given set of circumstances. Implementation intentions are if-then rules for behaviour that leverage the importance of reducing the amount of decisions you need to make in the moment (which takes far more will power).<sup>9</sup> A very simple example would be to decide to do push-ups every time a television commercial comes on. The implementation intention is "if a commercial break appears on the television, then I will get up and do 10 push-ups". This may be used to achieve part of a higher order goal such as being able to pass a fitness test. In terms of leadership behaviour, an individual may set an intention to be out from behind their desk talking to their colleagues whenever they happen to have a cup of coffee in hand, which may flow from a bigger goal to be more approachable for their team. Implementation intentions work best for behaviours you want to start and don't work as well for behaviours you want to stop.<sup>10</sup>

If you have a plan to start a new behaviour, it's also useful to have a plan to deal with the inevitable barriers that get in the way. This is called coping planning.<sup>11</sup> Again, this is helpful because deciding how we will deal with challenges in advance makes it easier to do so. Most people have a good understanding of how their goal might derail so are in a good position to plan for this. A coping plan to keep up an exercise programme might include strategies to deal with cold weather or injury for example (two very common exercise derailers). This also helps the tendency for people to engage in black and white thinking about their progress (they are either all in or give up at the first hiccup) as it

accommodates the reality that change is hard and continuing the momentum of the behaviour change is important., even in the face of inevitable setbacks.

## Stopping old habits

Stopping existing unwanted or unhelpful behaviour presents additional challenges to starting a new behaviour, as past behaviour is one of the strongest predictors of future behaviour.<sup>12</sup> To overcome this effect, people need to be able to break the habitual nature of behaviour by bringing non-conscious processes back under conscious control. Unfortunately, humans tend to underestimate how much of their behaviour is automatic rather than deliberate, and they tend to overestimate how much of their behaviour is goal driven by generating after-the-fact explanations for their own behaviour.<sup>13,14</sup> Unfortunately – we are on auto-pilot far more than we would like to admit and so the following strategies are designed to assist in this challenging task.

If we are trying to resist an old behaviour we can feel like we get into a battle with ourselves as we try to do the right thing. This takes up a huge amount of energy and is not always successful. What can be more successful is shaping the environment and your reactions to better support desired behaviour. This is the strategic way to manage and stop old habits.<sup>15</sup> The following steps can help you be more strategic with your self-control.

**Situation Selection**, is characterised by consciously choosing to be in places or with people that help our self-control, and is consequently, very strategic in nature. Some examples of situation selection are choosing to spend the morning in a café completing some writing without the distraction of colleagues, asking a waiter not to bring the desert menu, or removing distracting apps from a smart phone.

**Situation Modification**. In this instance, if a situation cannot be avoided, an attempt is made to change features of the situation to make the desired behaviour easier to complete and the undesired behaviour more difficult. This requires a degree of pre-commitment. Examples of this type of modification include unchecking the box that keeps you signed in to Facebook, placing your alarm clock out of reach on the other side of the room, or packing your gym bag the night before so you are ready to go in the morning.

**Attentional Deployment**, can be used when one is unable to avoid or modify a tempting situation. It relies on the principle that it is difficult to pay attention to all available information in any given situation. For example, when you are faced with a struggle to get out of bed on a cold morning, attention could instead be diverted to thinking about a forthcoming hot cup of coffee. Another example would be listening to music while running in order to distract from any fatigue or discomfort.

The next strategy is **Cognitive Change** or changing how you think about a situation. An example would be reframing fatigue as evidence of hard work.

The final strategy is called **Response Modulation**, which is useful in unavoidable situations or where earlier interventions have not been implemented. This strategy requires will-power, but it is typically less successful as it is cognitively demanding. In these instances, individuals could use breathing

exercises or techniques such as being vigilant in monitoring and reacting to potential slip-ups.<sup>16</sup> Other forms of response modulation include mindfully paying attention to urges and just letting them pass without acting on them.

## Make sure you reward yourself!

Finally, we can use rewards to reinforce the behaviours we want to do more of. One method is called temptation bundling – it means that, for some rewards, you can only access them when you complete a particular behaviour that you want to increase.<sup>17</sup> An example is that if I enjoy music – I can only listen to it when out for a walk or at the gym. This increases the likelihood that I will engage in exercise. Some behaviours that we want to stop are inherently rewarding in themselves (like bingeing on Netflix and too much chocolate cake). In these situations it's better to replace the behaviour with a healthier (but still rewarding) substitute than simply trying to stop.

## Summary

Changing behaviour can be hard and is typically associated with setbacks. Being realistic about this, planning for setbacks and being strategic on how we manage our self-control can all help to harness habits to achieve long term goals. If you would like extra help and coaching around this reach out to your friendly camp or base psychologist.

## References

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