



Why Change Is Not Easy

It seems necessary to spend some time looking at how our brain works because it is what determines our actions and how we respond to cues received from our body to address our needs. We have come to understand much more about how the brain and mind work, helping us to better understand why we do what we do and what it takes to change this. We all have a conscious mind that can be creative, problem solve, and use logic and rational thought. And we also all have an unconscious mind that is based on past learning, is repetitive and habitual, and does not incorporate logic and rational thought. These two parts of our mind are vital in allowing us to learn new tasks and to repeat known patterns without awareness. But they are not equally engaged. In reality, researchers believe that about 95% of our thoughts are unconscious--meaning they are learned through our experience, and most of these are learned in our early life. When we were children our brains spent much of their time receiving certain brave ways that made us very receptive, like a sponge. So we gathered data, heavily influenced by the emotions and stimuli we received. And we didn't have the ability to use logic and reasoning when we made sense of this data. Instead, we quickly made sense of messages about what will help us to survive (the brain's most significant function). Our brain is influenced in this process by hormones and neurotransmitters to reinforce the response or thought, which we then repeat over and over. Just think tens of thousands of times. That's a lot of reinforcement!

So if 95% of our daily thoughts are unconscious, we are thinking and acting out of habit most of the time. It also makes sense then why creating new habits is not a simple process and actually requires active practice and effective reinforcement to make them become lasting changes. Another way to make sense of this is to realize that our mind is drawn to what is familiar, whether positive or negative, and it avoids what is unfamiliar. Making significant changes in what foods you eat, habits of snacking or not, meal timing, and fasting are all new, therefore unfamiliar to your mind. While the old habits of snacking, eating problematic foods, thinking we can't lose weight, eating on a schedule regardless of actual need for food are familiar and have been reinforced into our unconscious mind so are accessed first.

Now, this does not mean that we cannot change our habits of thought and behavior, but it means that it takes more effort than we would like and that we can't wait for the changes to just descend upon us.

Another important factor in our habits of thought and behavior is that we have hormones, neurotransmitters, and other systems that activate certain responses in our brains. These senses and chemical reactions reinforce behaviors that help us avoid pain and seek pleasure. As I mentioned earlier, one of our brain's key roles is to protect us, ancestrally this was clearly attached to helping us survive long enough to procreate and keep the species going. An important part of this goal was to reinforce finding and consuming food for sustenance. Of course, even in modern day, we need to find and consume food to help nourish our bodies. But unlike in the early days of human existence, we now have an overabundance of food available, and highly palatable food at that. So early in our development, we need a mechanism to impress upon our brain how and where to access food, and what food is safe to eat and what food is not. We learn to avoid poisonous foods due to the bitterness we taste when sampling them. And we learn that the tastes of savory foods (umami) typically means we will be getting protein to use as a building block for our body. And, to much of our delight and later frustration, we learn that the taste of sweetness means calorically dense foods, which our body reads as quick energy.

Now without going into all the details about how we perceive these different tastes and how they affect our brain, I think it is easy to understand that we are wired to seek foods that bring pleasure and avoid pain, and those we perceive will bring us immediate energy. I often joke with clients that when they are sensing hunger, whether from the effects of insulin, depletion of glycogen, or the body's sense of threat, almost no one's brain tells them to go get a nice bunch of broccoli! Instead, our brain tells us that we need instant energy, avoidance of pain, and relief through pleasure.

To be clear, I did not just share all of this to reinforce some old notion you may have that you are doomed to always eat badly and too often, that you have no ability to control it, and trying to lose weight or get healthy is just a fantasy. But I do want you to understand some of the complexity that you are working with as you make dietary changes and incorporate fasting. One of the most common things I hear from people in this community is frustration with themselves that they don't seem to be able to easily make these changes without trial and error, setbacks, and their sense that there is no hope for them. In those moments they get stuck in that line of negative thinking that they are a failure. No, the fact that you live in an environment that includes having easy access to highly palatable, rewarding foods that cater to what our brains are seeking is not your fault. But you need to learn how to address your needs in ways that don't cause self-harm and derail you for making progress toward your health and weight goals.

If you read or listen to much of anything in the self-help, motivation, or entrepreneurial space, you have probably heard much about the importance of knowing your WHY. It is crucial for you to know why you are doing this, why you are embarking on changing your behaviors and mindset, what is the outcome you are seeking, and how do you want to feel along the way. All too often, we focus too much on just achieving a particular outcome but don't really solidify for ourselves what that will entail. Regardless of your age, you are creating your life from here forward. What positives will these changes bring to the life you are creating, what negatives will these changes prevent? Knowing that losing weight will help you get back into a bathing suit next summer may not be a powerful enough WHY to keep you moving forward when the going gets rough. But knowing that this weight loss can lead to you being able to be active and mobile in retirement and with your grandkids or nieces and nephews, or that resolving your insulin resistance can mean that you maintain good brain health and will not be tied to numerous medications and treatments for the rest of your life, just might make skipping meals and making different food choices worth it.