



Strategies for Habit Change

So far in this course, you hopefully have become more realistic about the reality of changing your behaviors without simply falling into an old pattern of believing it can't happen or that you are a failure when it doesn't. Now let's look at some specific strategies you can implement in successfully making your behavior and thought habit changes.

If you remember from a previous video that 95% of our brain's activities are unconscious, meaning without awareness, it makes sense why the habits we build are so critical. Our mind will automatically do what is habit and will take additional time and effort to do what is not. And if we are under stress, the parts of our brain responsible for willpower and reasoning skills are offline and will not engage to create new behavior choices. In order to really make lasting changes then, we have to build new habits that our brain will access instead of old habits that led us to our current challenges with our health or weight.

One key element of building a new habit is to make doing it simple. Again, our brains act on autopilot and work on a principle of minimal effort. If I want to create a new habit of eating healthy food, I have to make only healthy food easily accessible. If I want to drink only tea, coffee, or water while fasting, making these beverages easy to access or prep will help me build the habit. If they are tucked away in the cupboard or back of the fridge, instead I will too easily grab something else that requires less effort. And the reverse of this principle is also important to implement. That is, to make not doing the new behavior difficult. So having no sugary foods or drinks in my sites when I enter the kitchen, means I cannot fall into the old habit of drinking or eating them instead of what is healthy for me. If I have to leave my house to buy snack foods, that makes eating bad food more work, so not doing my new habit of eating only healthier food is harder than eating this way. For me an example of making my eating behavior habit easier to do is to avoid expecting myself to activate willpower, especially in those situations that are most challenging. If I decided to not eat grains and ordered my favorite pizza while out with friends, I would not white knuckle it and hope that I can be strong enough to avoid eating the crust. Instead, I would either order a crustless pizza or when I take my slices from the pan remove the toppings from the crust before placing my plate in front of me. Expecting myself to avoid this temptation is likely to lead to doing the opposite of my goal and to break my habit building

momentum. Instead, I can make it simple and remove the easy access. I know for certain I would still enjoy that meal.

We are likely to repeat behaviors that bring us an immediate sense of reward or pleasure and unlikely to repeat those that bring us an immediate feeling of punishment or pain. In a world full of foods that are intentionally designed to be highly rewarding, this is an important piece to address in the changes you are making. When it comes to these foods, the immediate outcome is a sense of reward such as relief, satisfaction, or deliciousness, and avoidance of pain. However, the long term results typically are the opposite in that they lead to either feeling punished or pain such as fat gain or no fat loss, health problems, and actual physical pain, and very little reward or sense of joy. It is important to keep your long term benefits front and center in your mind, while working to create more of a sense of reward in the immediacy. Rather than relying on the behavior itself to fulfil this sense or reward, because it probably won't actually feel that way at first, you can reward yourself each time you complete a certain behavior. It is absolutely not helpful though to choose a reward that stimulates a conflicting value to what you are striving to create. If you want to create a habit of fasting three times a week and eating only healthy food, rewarding yourself for completing a fast by overeating processed or sugary foods is in direct opposition with the behavior you are wanting to reinforce. Instead, celebrate the completion of the fast with a celebratory reaction, and maybe reward yourself with a relaxing audiobook or something else that feels good to you but that does not conflict with your goals.

Two other important aspects of successful habit change are tracking the change and having accountability. Most of us have probably experienced times when we set a goal and decided to make habit changes, but after the excitement of the new behavior wore off or we lost our focus on whatever made it seem important, the new behavior required stopped as well. Therefore, tracking the behavior is a helpful way to reinforce it until it becomes a habit and no longer needs tracking. As discussed in a previous lesson, celebrating our small steps of progress, meaning completing the behavior, is a great way to provide an emotional reinforcement as a reward for the behavior. There are numerous habit tracking apps you can check out, or create a simple chart for yourself. For many people the reinforcement of getting to check off that they did the target behavior is rewarding and creates some motivation to engage in it again. I caution you not to make tracking your behaviors become too complicated or it may feel like another task in your busy life and will likely deter you from making this a habit. Also, we often discuss the pros and cons of tracking weight as your marker of success. My sharing this tracking strategy is intended to actually track your completion of behavior, not the outcome. Weighing yourself frequently and using what the scale indicates as your reinforcement for the new behaviors you are building can be fraught with challenges. If you set a goal to save enough money for an

international holiday, you might set up a savings account just for the trip and add \$50 each paycheck. If you only focus on the total in the account, you might feel discouraged. If you need \$5,000 and only see that you have saved \$150 so far, the goal may seem too far off in the future and it becomes too easy to give yourself excuses for not adding the money consistently. But if instead, you got a reminder that you contributed to your trip fund and are getting closer, you may be better able to sense this as a rewarding behavior and feel motivated to keep going.

Having an accountability partner can help serve as another opportunity to reinforce that you are making progress toward your goal by taking steps in the habit change process. Accountability partners can help affirm your effort and also help you strategize when the process is not easy. Some people even go as far as to make a self-contract or social-contract that spells out what behaviors they will engage in and what they will avoid. The contract spells out what the penalty will be for not completely the targeted behaviors or engaging in counterproductive behaviors. So if you write a contract that you share with a close friend or family member that states you will fast three times per week and will meditate for at least 10 minutes every day, you would also write what will happen if you don't. Your accountability partner should then expect that you will incur the agreed upon penalty.

Two of my favorite authors on habit change both address the usefulness of attaching your new behaviors to a currently existing, routine behavior. You can use an existing behavior as the prompt necessary to signal you to engage in the new behavior, or stack the new behavior atop of an existing behavior. At first it is helpful to maybe limit stacking only a few behaviors at a time to build them in without it becoming overwhelming. Eventually the new behavior will become as much a part of your existing habit that you won't even have to work hard to remember to do it. This practice might look something like: When I finish eating dinner, I drink a cup of tea to begin fasting until my next planned meal.

And lastly, making your habit change behaviors simply a stretch from what you can do without too much effort now is key. If you set your fasting goal as doing a 16:8 fast each day, but you have been doing that for months and have even done a few 36 hour fasts, your goal is too easy and will not challenge you enough to work toward change. The human brain typically enjoys a challenge but not one that is too difficult or seemingly impossible. Finding the sweet spot of behavior goals that push you to strive to do better or more without overwhelming you in intensity will help you reach these goals successfully.