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Behavioral Change and How to Make it Last

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"Change is changing."
Anonymous

Whether you want to lead a healthier lifestyle, reduce your procrastination, improve time management, deal with social media addiction or start meditating regularly, chances are you are struggling. Or it's a safe bet that you´ve made some progress but then reverted back to your old habits when you are overwhelmed or during times of difficulty and distress. Why is long-lasting change so hard to achieve? And what can we do about it?

In this technical note, we tackle these questions and offer some suggestions on how to create and maintain new behaviors and habits, without resorting to self-imposed pressure or guilt. Let's first look at what we need in order to ignite change.

Prerequisites and Sources of Change

Awareness

Changing ourselves or our habits is hard for many reasons. Neuroscience studies have shown that when we repeat something over and over, a neural circuit is formed in our brain, which is reinforced every time we repeat the behavior. Hence, behaviors we've had for quite some time become automatic and we´re usually not even aware of the mental processes that underlie them.

Awareness is therefore the first and ultimately most important prerequisite for changing. Cultivating and developing our self-awareness is what allows us to create the *space* and the willingness to act differently from how we have acted up to this point. On the contrary, ignorance or denial of our shortcomings impedes any possibility of improvement. Of course, changing behavior requires willpower, but we first need knowledge of what to improve.

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Awareness is also needed to truly understand how our behavior makes us feel, how it makes other people feel, the pros and cons of this behavior, and generally why we engage in it. Without awareness we cannot even see obvious automatic habits that have been forming for years, let alone interrupt them.

For example, if our goal is to diminish mindless scrolling on social media, the first step is to become aware of *when* we engage with this habit, how often and for how long, and try to stay present with our emotions and feelings as it happens. Simply observing, tracking and reflecting on our behavioral patterns is an important and greatly underestimated first step towards awareness, and therefore change.

A Growth Mindset

On top of awareness, our mindset plays a key role in the process of change. One way to build a long/term successful relationship with change is to develop a *growth mindset*[1], a concept studied in detail by Stanford professor Carol Dweck. A growth mindset emphasizes progress, learning and building new abilities, as opposed to the *fixed mindset*, where people believe abilities are fixed, minimize the importance of effort and believe mostly in innate talent. The focus of a growth mindset person is on progress, and the focus of a fixed mindset person is on results.

In the case of behavioral change, the result of the fixed mindset is that we expect to make big changes fast and we get very discouraged and even blindsided by our setbacks, interpreting a temporary failure as a tragedy. A fixed mindset also makes us prone to what is termed the "what-the-hell effect". A typical example of the "what-the-hell effect" is when we try to eat healthy and have been doing well for a while, but one day we succumb to temptation (having a bunch of cookies or a little too much ice cream), after which we irrationally conclude that since we have already failed, we might as well really indulge and go back for even more of the unhealthy things we have been avoiding. This type of reasoning occurs not only when dealing with food habits but can be applied to any setback or failure of willpower.[2]

However, if we worked on consolidating a growth mindset, we would view change as a learning journey involving different steps, and we'd stay focused on the *effort* and the progress, rather than the results. Growth mindset people think "I can get there with effort", "I can build this skill", "I can learn this over time". Consequently, they accept and deal with challenges more effectively even if there is a risk of failure because failure is just one of many steps in a longer growth process. This mindset allows them to build real confidence based on experience and trial and error, rather than an abstract idea of how one can or should perform. And finally, with a growth mindset we are more open to feedback and use it as a useful resource for development.

The Why of Your Change

It´s hardly possible to make a real change, let alone sustain it, if we are not clear on why we want it. Understanding the benefit we might gain from changing is what provides the necessary motivation. The more compelling our reason, the more likely we are to actually follow through. When the desired goal affects the deep ¨to be¨ dimension, besides the pragmatic "to do" objective,

[1] Dweck, Carol. Mindset-updated edition: Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential. Hachette UK, 2017.

[2] Davis, Paula. "How To Avoid The 'What-The-Hell Effect' When You Fail." Forbes. Last modified January 30, 2017. https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauladavislaack/2017/01/30/how-to-avoid-the-what-the-hell-effect-when-you-fail/#11fdadc33455.

the motivation for change becomes much stronger. It's the difference between being pulled by a meaningful goal rather than pushing towards it with a sense of heaviness and dread. In this sense, questions like "Why am I doing this? What do I want to change for?" or "Who do I want to be?" can reveal a greater purpose behind the change we want to make. This last question in particular is a powerful tool for creating a compelling vision of ourselves which can help move us in the direction we want. It is also at the center of Intentional Change Theory[3], which posits that the way towards change is creating a compelling vision of who we want to be and outlining an action plan on how to bridge the gap between who we currently are and the vision of our ideal self.

The Impact of Your Change

Even more powerful is the question **"Who am I doing this for?"**. To truly bring meaning to our goal, we need to think of others: it's much easier to make a change when we contemplate the positive impact it can have on our loved ones. Who do you want to change for? How will the people close to you benefit from changing your behavior or stopping a negative habit? Reflecting on these questions and creating a vivid image and feeling around them can develop your *transcendent motivation*- an intrinsic, others-oriented, prosocial drive which tends to work much better than extrinsic rewards[4].

Transcendent motivation is powerful because it's grounded in a sense of deep purpose, which is especially important when we are facing difficulties. Transcendent motivation can enable us to overcome hurdles and even make them seem smaller than they actually are. And, with a clear understanding of what our change can do for others, we are less likely to give up.

A Crisis

Unfortunately, sometimes, painful life or professional events can provide the ultimate motivation for change. Pain, setbacks, failure and crisis are all powerful sources of change. In fact, sometimes the only thing that will get us to really change may be a crisis. Many high performing executives have come to realize the need to make a change in their workaholic behavior only after having suffered health consequences or seen the effects of non-stop working on their family life. Or they understand and accept the need to control their impulsiveness only after being fired.

Why Is It So difficult?

Patience, Patience and More Patience

Although theoretically we know that "slow and steady wins the race", that's often not how we approach change. We want things to change fast and casually ignore the commonsense truth that it takes time, patience and sometimes "one step forward, two steps back". Or we ignore a bad habit until it starts to create real issues in our lives, and we then panic and rush into radical change mode, taking unrealistic decisions and harsh actions. Most of the time, the result is that after a few weeks we are right back where we started. Patience is vital to be able plan our

[3] Boyatzis, Richard, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Kleio Akrivou. "The ideal self as the driver of intentional change." Journal of Management Development (2006).

[4] Koltko-Rivera, Mark E. "Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: Self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research, and unification." Review of general psychology 10, no. 4 (2006): 302-317.