

CHANGE YOUR BAD HABITS TO GOOD

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Give a man a fish, the Talmud says, and he will not be hungry. But *teach* him to fish, and he will *never* be hungry. This ancient maxim is still pertinent today, especially in the health care and mental health fields. One of the best ways a practitioner can help patients and clients to achieve health objectives is by giving them the tools they need to help themselves: skills for preventing and overcoming illness, skills for managing stress, and, most important, skills for dealing with new challenges in an ever-changing world.

In a course I developed at the University of California called “Self-Management and Self-Control,” my students and I surveyed more than 2,000 years of self-change techniques – perhaps most of the major self-change techniques that have ever been proposed by religious leaders, philosophers, psychologists, and psychiatrists. We also reviewed the scientific research literature on self-change, a topic that behavioral scientists began to explore in earnest in the 1960s.

Here is what we found: Of the hundreds of techniques that have been suggested over the centuries, perhaps only a dozen are distinctly different. Many have now been subjected to scientific study, meaning that researchers have been trying to see whether the techniques “really” work and which ones work best. Unfortunately, a few techniques, like prayer, have not been studied to any great extent, perhaps because scientists get a bit queasy when it comes to spirituality.

Of the non-spiritual methods, three well-tested ones deserve special mention. They’re powerful, they’re simple, and they’re easy to learn. What’s more, if you look carefully at the people who have made successful changes in their lives – changes in eating habits, exercise regimens, career paths, coping strategies, and so on – you’ll find that they often relied on one or more of these methods. Best of all, these techniques do not require “will-power,” the magical salve of motivational speakers and snake-oil vendors. They require straightforward skills that anyone can master.

To get yourself or your client started in a new direction, try the “Three M’s” of self-change: Modify Your Environment, Monitor Your Behavior, and Make Commitments.

1) *Modify your environment.* If the view outside your window distracts you from your work, move your furniture

around. If it's hard to make friends in your little town, get out of it. If you keep forgetting to feed the dog, put a reminder note on your bathroom mirror. If your house is filled with unhealthful food, throw the food away, or, better yet, feed it to the dog. If your job makes you miserable, dial the phone now to get weekly job listings delivered to your door; if you wake up to a stack of job listings every Sunday, you'll probably get some new ideas.

To change your *self*, start by changing your world. People who have never tried this are astounded by the enormous effect it often has. One of my students got herself bicycling every day simply by putting her bicycle in her doorway before she left for school in the morning. When she returned home, the first thing she saw was the bike; that's all she needed to start pedaling away some excess calories. A colleague of mine stopped his life-long habit of picking loose skin from his lips simply by attaching a tube of lip-balm to his wrist for a week. I've known several people who have overcome nail biting simply by buying fifty nail files and distributing them everywhere: in their pockets, their desks, their bedrooms, and their purses. With a nail file always within reach, people tend to groom rather than bite, and grooming makes fingernails smooth and strong.

I've seen my children use this simple technique many times; you don't have to have graduate training to become a master of self-change. For example, Justin, my sixteen-year-old, often places small florescent reminder notes at eye-level on the inside of the frame of his bedroom door. A recent one read, "Remember to shampoo the dog on Saturday or Dad with kill you." (Here he was using exaggeration to good effect.)

The power of rearranging one's space was well demonstrated in studies reported in the 1960s. Dr. Israel Goldiamond of the University of Chicago taught this technique to patients with a variety of personal problems. A young woman who had difficulty studying made dramatic strides when she got a better desk lamp and moved her desk away from her bed. A man was able to get his diet under control by limiting his eating to the kitchen – no more snacks in the bedroom and living room. A couple that was having arguments because of an incident of infidelity was able to calm things down by rearranging all of their furniture – creating the impression that they were starting over in a new home.

Psychologist Richard Stuart, who ultimately became an advisor to Weight Watchers International, showed in 1967 that overweight women could lose weight simply by

modifying their eating environment appropriately. A recent study by Joshua Klayman and Kaye Brown even shows that thinking processes can be improved with a small change in learning materials: College students learned more about various diseases when they studied the diseases in pairs, side-by-side, than when they studied them one at a time.

2) *Monitor your behavior.* I've been reading research studies on self-monitoring for twenty years, and I've conducted some myself. To be honest, I still don't fully understand why this technique works, but it does, and remarkably well for most people. The fact is, *if you monitor what you do, you'll probably do better.* Start weighing yourself every day, and you'll probably start to lose weight. Start keeping a record of what you eat, and you'll probably start eating more wisely. A case in point: David Liederman, founder the David's Cookies, a chain a gourmet cookie shops, was on top of the world financially in the late 1980s, but his world was about to crumble. He had become obese, and his cholesterol was a dangerously high 325. Prompted by a stern warning from his physician and tips from friends and family, he began recording everything he ate. He soon lost 100 pounds and brought his cholesterol count down to 180.

Use gizmos if it helps you. If not, use anything that's at hand. If you say "you know" too much, start wearing a golf counter on your wrist, and press the count button whenever you catch yourself saying "you know." You'll start to say it less frequently in just a few days. If wearing a wrist counter would embarrass you, then each time you say "you know," make a small tear in a piece of paper in your pocket. The result is the same: You become more aware of what you're doing, and that makes you perform better.

If techniques like this sound silly, keep in mind that famous, successful people do strange things like this all the time. The psychologist B. F. Skinner used to make graphs and charts to keep track of how many pages he had written, and at times I've used all kinds of elaborate setups to boost my own productivity. When I was a graduate student, for example, I attached the reading lamp at my desk to a countdown timer. Whenever an hour accumulated on the timer, the lamp shut off, at which point I'd add another point to graph of my productive hours. Every dot I added felt like a warm congratulations from a good friend.

The power of self-monitoring has been demonstrated by a variety of research conducted over the last four decades. In a study I published in 1978 with Claire Goss, for example, we taught a disruptive third-grade boy to rate his own classroom behavior twice a day. He simply checked off a

score for himself, indicating how well behaved he had been in the morning or afternoon. With his awareness increased, he stayed in his seat more than usual, completed more assignments, and rarely got in trouble. A recent study by McKenzie and Rushall showed that teenagers arrived more promptly at a swim practice when they were given an attendance sheet to record their arrival times. Working with emotionally disturbed children, Sonya Carr recently showed that self-monitoring improves academic performance in reading, mathematics, and spelling. Another study, published by Kerry Martin and Carla Manno of the University of Virginia, even showed that students will compose better stories given a simple check-off list that includes elements of good writing. Dozens of studies have shown similar results, all spurred by heightening our awareness of our behavior.

3) *Make commitments.* When you make a commitment to another person, you establish what psychologists call a “contingency of reinforcement.” That means that you’ve arranged for a reward if you comply and, of course, for a punishment if you don’t. It puts some pressure on you, and that’s often just what you need. The nice thing about this kind of pressure is that it’s pressure you arranged yourself. No one imposed it on you.

If you want to exercise more, make arrangements to exercise with a friend. If you don’t show up, your friend will get angry, and that may be just the ticket to keeping you punctual. If you’ve got a serious problem, try making a serious commitment. If you’re struggling, yet again, to quit smoking, write a brutally insulting letter to your boss and give it to someone you trust. Tell your friend, “If you ever see me with another cigarette, please mail this letter, no matter how much I protest.” Serious problems deserve serious contingencies.

The power of commitment as a self-change strategy has been emphasized by major religions for millennia, and recent research continues to show the power of this strategy. For example, in 1994, Dana Putnam and other researchers at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute showed that patients who made written commitments were far more likely to take prescribed medicine than patients who had made no such commitments. M. L. Kau and J. Fischer reported a case of a woman who got herself to jog regularly by setting up a simple arrangement with her husband: He paid her quarters and took her out on weekends whenever she met her jogging goals. Psychologists Carl Thoresen and Michael Mahoney, authors of *Behavioral Self-Control*, have emphasized the importance of “self-imposed contingencies” in bringing about self-

change. Making commitments to others is an easy way to create consequences for your own behavior and hence, to encourage yourself to change.

There's good news here for all of us, both as individuals and as treatment providers. Self-change is often an essential element in disease prevention, in recovery from illness or injury, and in the achievement of emotional and physical well-being. As our bodies age, and as the world around us changes, we face a never-ending stream of challenges that demand adaptations. We can meet many of the demands and overcome many of the challenges with some simple skills – practices that anyone can master and that don't require will-power – in other words, with *skill, not will*.

About the author: Dr. Epstein is a psychology professor at San Diego State University and an editor for *Psychology Today* magazine. His recent books include *Self-Help Without the Hype* and *Pure Fitness: Body Meets Mind*.