



Getting your brain onboard with a healthy habit

One of the first obstacles in maintaining behavior change is overcoming what your mind does not yet recognize as your “future self.” On a subconscious level your mind can easily put changes off until the future where it believes the “new you” can handle anything. Why is this? First, your brain thinks your future self is a different person. Here’s a great example of how this works:

You know you have to be up at 6:00 a.m. in order to exercise before work. But here you are at midnight watching every minute of a movie you’ve seen a dozen times. On a conscious level you know you are setting yourself up to fail but on a subconscious level your mind thinks of the tomorrow version of you as a completely different person. That person can deal with the consequences of staying up late and still get up to exercise before work.

Studies Show

Medical science shows, through brain scans, that this feature is built into your brain. They show that different parts of our brain light up when we're thinking of ourselves versus when we're thinking of other people. What’s interesting is that in some people, when they're asked to think about their “future” selves, the region that lights up is the one reserved for other people. In other words, if someone asks you to think about what you'll look like in 20 years your brain treats it as though you're trying to picture a stranger. Now think about what this means in terms of your ability to successfully change lifestyle habits.

Forming Habits

According to one study, habits take 10 weeks before any sort of new behavior starts to feel automatic. That means you're looking at over two months before that treadmill at the gym becomes more of a "weekly routine." During these 2 months any kind of change in your routine can disrupt the process. If you have a week when you can't exercise because of the flu, a pulled muscle or working late then the habit is broken. Typically, this is when most people go back to their old ways. Your brain likes efficiency and mindless habits are efficient so it wants to create mental shortcuts that help you get through the day using the least amount of brain power necessary. This type of efficiency allows you to drive to work half asleep and get there with no recollection of the trip you just made, routines require far less energy. All of this means that breaking out of a routine requires a lot of energy and making a conscious effort.

Will Power

Can you believe that your will power can actually be something that holds back your success? Your brain uses progress as an excuse for self-indulgence. Think of a time when you were on a really great stretch for creating a new habit and then because you’ve been doing so well you “owe it” to yourself to take a day off. Sound familiar? This is called “will power depletion” and its every bit as detrimental to your goals as it sounds.



This wouldn't be a big deal if all it meant was that the occasional "You look great." compliment resulted in one celebratory cheeseburger. Unfortunately, for many people that initial slip can lead to many more poor choices. So, if you make progress on your diet or your exercise program you are very likely to give yourself an excuse to splurge just once.

Your brain also prefers bad habits to real failure. So, while your conscious self is busy being disappointing in your bad habits, your subconscious self is secretly doing everything it can to sabotage any efforts to correct them, because self-indulgence, not self-improvement, is what your brain actually wants. Your subconscious would actually prefer and accept one type of failure out of fear of suffering a much greater one, almost like a plea bargain in court. Once more, the brain prefers the previous, easy state of affairs, even if that state involves a series of habits that are on a pace to kill you by age 40.

Tips to making this new lifestyle habit stick.

- Know what you want. If you can perfectly visualize the habit in your head, the work will be easier.
- Make a list of the benefits of your new habit. A pro/con list is a great way to see in front of you the benefits of your new habit and the consequences if you don't stick to the habit.
- Commit to the habit. If you want to change, you have to work at it. Do not quit if you have one failure. And don't blame yourself for the failure either, get over it and move forward.
- Set your own goals, and reward yourself. Write the goals down, and post them all around. In your kitchen, bedroom, office, even the bathroom if necessary. Once you've met those goals, treat yourself to a movie, date night, shoes and new fishing pole. As long as the treat isn't anything you're trying to quit.
- Start with little steps. Many habit changes start with an 'all or nothing' attitude. Make sure to break down your overall goal with the little steps that will take you there and give you victories along the way.
- Go for consistency rather than performance. For example, if your goal is to walk daily, it's better to start by walking 15 minutes every day for a week and building on that than jumping in with a 2 mile walk and then being so sore you quit.
- Consult a friend. It's what they're there for. Ask them to keep track of your accomplishments or act as a therapist if something goes wrong.
- Don't stop. Even after your goals are set and met you need to continue with your lifetime habit.

It can be tough to muster up the motivation you need to change your lifestyle. Pick up a good habit like exercising or drop an unhealthy one like smoking so recommit to yourself every day and if you fall of track start over immediately.

For assistance helping your employees form health habits, contact Sharon Rateike, corporate wellness program coordinator at (920) 568-5475 or Sharon.Rateike@forthc.com.

