

## Habits

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Habits are behaviors we do quickly and easily and without much awareness. Acting out of habit is simply part of life. There is nothing particularly “wrong” with habitual action. However, sometimes we find that our habitual actions don’t fit very well with the life we actually want to be living. This is not all that surprising since we can easily develop a habit without much noticing that we are doing so. As people sometimes explain, “I just sort of fell into it.”

Because habits are done quickly and easily and without much awareness, changing a habit first requires that we become more aware. It requires “consciousness raising,” or “noticing.” Said slightly differently, it requires mindful, rather than mindless, action and mindful action is best done from “that place from which” one notices and even notices noticing, the metaphorical “eye” in the psychological hurricane of thoughts, images and bodily sensations.

At the outset of habit change, our noticing almost always comes “too late.” What we notice is “that *didn’t* work!” In other words, the opportunity to act differently has already passed. Life has moved on. We might recognize, “that didn’t work,” three months, three weeks, three days, three hours or three minutes after doing our habit and in each of these cases, the opportunity for different action has come and gone. In such moments we commonly promise ourselves, “Next time!”

It would be nice if we could move directly from noticing “too late” to noticing “just before” so that we could do a “new thing” rather than the “old thing.” Unfortunately, it commonly doesn’t work that way. Instead, of going directly from

“the time for the new behavior is past” to “the time for the new behavior is *about* to be present,” we instead find ourselves “in between.” We notice that, though we have already begun our habit, the situation is not yet over. The drink, so to speak, has been poured but we haven’t yet drunk it. That “in-the-moment-awareness” provides our first real opportunity to switch to a new behavior rather than continuing the old.

Habits are said to “fit like a glove” which is to say they “feel right” even if they work out poorly. Thus, whatever new behavior we do, it will not have that quality of “fitting like a glove.” Instead, it will most likely feel odd, weird, strange and “not like me.” Nothing’s wrong! That is just what happens when anyone acts differently than a way that has been done “quickly and easily and without much awareness.” Those feelings of “strangeness” are just part of the “price of admission” paid in the habit change process. Making that payment allows us to enter the life we are more interested in living.

Additionally, when we begin acting differently, our performance will not be nearly as good as it might eventually become. Quite often we begin awkwardly and clumsily even if later we might perform well and with ease. Once again – nothing’s wrong! That, also, is simply part of the process of changing from an old, well-practiced habit, to a different behavior.

The key thing to note is this: if we refuse to experience either: 1) the “this is odd, weird, strange and not like me” feeling or 2) performing poorly and awkwardly, at least in the beginning, then it will be impossible to change our old habit and adopt new behavior. Why? Because these are exactly the experiences that come when we try to change from an old, well-established, way of acting to a

new and different one. We might describe these two experiences as additional parts of the overall “price of admission” to acting differently than we have quickly and easily acted up to now, a price that began with raising our awareness.

Habit change often raises the question of “will power.” Many folks think of “will power” what allows us to change when, in fact, it is what we get by changing. When we are doing our old behavior, we have lots of “will power” to act in that way. The more we do the new behavior the more “will power” we generate to act in that new way. Thus, “will power” is not what we *have* that lets us change. It is what we *get* by changing.

Consider an exercise like pushups. If you’ve been spending your time on the couch rather than doing pushups, you have lots of “couch-sitting-power.” However, if, day after day, you get down on the floor and push yourself up as many times as you can, your “get-on-the-floor-and-push-yourself-up-power” increases even though you didn’t have that much when you began. Your get-on-the-floor-and-push-yourself-up-power isn’t what allowed you to begin pushing yourself up or continue to keep at it. That happened because YOU *chose* to push yourself up and continue doing so. YOU made that *choice* in the beginning even though your body and mind didn’t feel much like doing so and YOU could only push yourself up a few times, and maybe not even once! However, the more YOU kept at it, the *easier* YOU found to persist. That is the story of “will power.” The more you do something the more “will power” you have to do it. The more you give in to an urge, the more will power you have to give in. The more you don’t give in to an urge, the more will power you have to resist. And, once you are aware of what you are doing in the moment you are doing it, you get to *choose* to continue or change. Continue making a choice and your sense of power to make that choice grows.

The longer we practice the new way of responding, the more we lose the sense that, ‘*is not* like me,’ and instead build, “this *is* like me.” Additionally, with practice, we tend to lose our awkwardness and our actions are performed more smoothly. In other words, the new behavior becomes more habitual. Even so, we never really lose our ability to perform old habits or the urge to do so. Once we learn to do something, we still know how to do it and the temptation to act in that old way is always around even if its strength lessens with the growing strength of the new way of acting. Another way to make this point is to say that as we can continue adding to our life history, we can’t just “throw away” the life history we already have.

Habit change has a “price of admission.” YOU can *choose* to pay that price by first becoming more aware and then accepting the discomforts that come with change for long enough that the change becomes a new habit. The more you exert your power to *choose* the better you become at doing so!