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Making Resolutions Work

The key to breaking bad habits is understanding how they're formed

By Chris Charlson



"The easiest way for me to start out is with a metaphor," Dr. Charles Brady says. Brady is a psychologist for the Lindner Center of Hope. "Picture yourself sitting on the edge of a forest and you want to clear a new path. You have to start by doing the heavy work first, cutting down all the trees; the very intensive work that happens up front. So the more that you clear the path and the more that you walk through it, it gets easier and easier. And as

you keep walking through it, you start trampling down the weeds and the weeds stop growing and eventually it's almost as if pavement gets poured on it. So the more you go down the path, the easier it is to go down the path, and the brain prefers to go down easy paths."

Hence a habit is born.

With the New Year quickly approaching, it's time to examine all those behaviors, both good and bad habits, that we choose to break or embrace. Perhaps if we better understand the science behind those habits, we have a better chance of changing them. Besides the do-it-yourself option, therapists, counselors, organizations and programs can help us succeed in our resolutions for change.

Carrots and sticks

According to Brady, habitual behavior can be traced to an area in the brain called the basal ganglia; the link between motor behavior, movement behavior and decision making. When we start a new behavior, chemicals are released in the brain, the most important one being dopamine, which rewards us for accomplishing that behavior, he says. The reward system keeps us moving forward to accomplish our goal with the biggest surges of dopamine occurring very early on. He uses the example of going to the gym as a new behavior: It takes a number of steps to get there, packing the gym bag, driving to the gym and changing clothes and then finally working out. Again, he emphasizes, the reward system occurs in the very early steps to provide motivation.

"Once you pick up the bag, once you start to get going, it's the anticipation of getting the new habit started," he says. "Hence being the biggest step and the one that gets the most rewarded in the brain."

[Watch our interview with Children's Hospital Psychologist Robin Gurwitsch about keeping family-centered resolutions]

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Habitual behavior sometimes can take on more serious forms and transition to addictions and compulsions. He explains that habits transition to addictions when the body begins to uncontrollably crave rewards from a certain behavior. Addictions typically intensify by requiring more and more of a certain behavior to satisfy a craving. Compulsive behavior moves in the opposite direction, he says, trying to avoid distress instead of searching for pleasure. Similar to addictions, compulsive behaviors tend to intensify over time. He says treatment for both disorders focuses on Differential Reinforcement Behavior of Other, where a person learns a new behavior to compete with the problematic one.

"They have to learn how to start to notice the early change in behavior," he says. "A therapist can help them identify those patterns, help develop new ideas and give them support to try things that are different."

Retraining the brain

Counselor and hypnotherapist Dr. Carole Stokes-Brewer says people often set themselves up for failure by using language such as "I am a chronic smoker," or "I am fat." She says our mind reads such statements as a condition that won't change, so it perpetuates the behavior. Instead, she says we need to change our thought process by keeping our language in the form of a present, positive message such as, "I am eating healthier today" or "I am free of smoking a little longer than yesterday," essentially envisioning themselves as they want to be. She also cautions against saying "I should" do something, as it creates guilt and resentment, which very rarely motivates change.

"You need to retrain the brain, the speaking and the stored patterns that go on," she says. "We have to change our language and experience or create an experience and feeling that we are doing this different or we can do this different."

Stokes-Brewer recommends writing experiences in journals so one can release his or her mind of accumulated clutter, making it easier to accept new behavior. For those trying to fulfill a resolution on their own, Stokes-Brewer's self-help book, *My Notes: Journey to Inspiration*, offers guidance.

"If they follow this for 30 days, they should find some change," she says.

Whatever it takes

For those who are beyond self-help, organizations like Center for Chemical Addictions Treatment (CCAT; www.ccatsober.org) or the Talbert House (www.talberthouse.com) act to guide people through more serious addictions. Talbert House Assistant Clinical Director Lisa Zimmer says it's a complete misconception that people have to hit rock bottom or be completely ready for change to have treatment work. She says they see people at the facility in all stages, from those in denial to those willing to do whatever it takes. Using cognitive behavior therapy (a therapy that helps modify self-perception) counselors tailor intervention to the stage of change people are in, she says, helping them modify the way they think.

"We want people to move their level of motivation from 'I'm thinking about it' to 'I'm preparing to do something about it' to 'I'm doing it' to maintaining the change," she says.

The facility offers both resident and outpatient programs for drug and alcohol treatment. Talbert House last year served 26,000 clients with a 71 percent successful completion rate, Zimmer says.

Victor, a client who graduated from Talbert House's Turning Point Program, says his struggles with substance abuse began as a teenager with beer, cigarettes and marijuana eventually transitioning to excessive alcohol, cocaine and crack use. After several stints in prison for felony possession charges and DUIs, a judge and Victor's mother finally petitioned to send him to the inpatient treatment at Talbert House, a move that he says saved his life.

"I was there 119 days and I needed every one of them," he says. "I had so many cognitive distortions that I had no idea the lies that I had been telling myself. Over time they helped me find clarity and find out what was really real."

Now sober for four and a half years, Victor attends the University of Cincinnati. He is a senior in the substance abuse counseling program and maintains a 3.7 GPA. He says his goal after graduation is to help others become free from addictions. He advises anyone with addiction to seek help immediately, because with help there's a better chance of success. He says that changing your life takes an incredible amount of work, but there really is no other alternative.

"Getting sober, it's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," he says. "The bottom line is everybody deserves a second chance."