

Changing Daily Habits

Where we will be in 10 years time will be determined not so much by big life decisions, but more from lots of little decisions that are repeated over and over – our daily habits. Decisions about when we go to bed, when we wake up, what we do when we wake up (exercise or roll over for another half hour of rest), what we eat for main meals, and what we eat for snacks. Another important (and often unconscious) habit is how we comfort ourselves when we are sad or stressed. Food (or drink, or smoking) can play a part here for some of us.

What are your daily habits when it comes to food, exercise, socialising, work and fun? And are your daily habits in harmony with how you see yourself, and where you want to be in 5 or 10 years time?

Knowing about the power of daily habits is a good start, but it's not enough. Change depends on three key building blocks - knowledge, motivation, and the emotional capacity to make positive changes.

The knowledge you need is partly understanding the power of small daily decisions, and also knowing about your body. What to eat. How to exercise effectively and safely. How to care for your health. Attending classes or being trained by a personal trainer can be a helpful strategy to build your knowledge about caring for your physical self.

Motivation comes in part from having short and long term goals, and tracking your progress towards those goals. Long term goals might relate to your work, your financial position, your health, or your relationships. Shorter term goals might relate to changed behaviours (new habits) and stepping stone changes such as reaching a savings target, becoming fitter, or toning up your body. Knowing where you want to get to, having a plan of how you intend to get there, and monitoring progress along the way are all part of building and maintaining motivation.

But having goals, having plans of how to achieve those goals, and measuring progress are not enough. Your emotional capacity will ultimately determine whether your best laid plans come to fruition. How many times have you started down the road of changed habits and then slipped back into old and ultimately unhelpful patterns? It's hard to stay motivated when you are lacking in positive energy. And it can also be hard to stay motivated through inevitable and quite normal periods of melancholy, when old patterns often reassert themselves.

So what is emotional capacity? Perhaps a better term might be emotional settledness. It is the extent to which you have made peace with the various bits that make up who you are – in other words, to become more integrated as a person. If you can spend less energy on these private, internal conflicts you will have more energy to pursue positive pursuits that ultimately help you towards your goals.

Similarly if you can learn to be more gentle and loving with yourself, you will have greater capacity to be forgiving of yourself during difficult periods. Self criticism for being sad, for example, can deepen and prolong periods of sadness, and can help to bring on unhelpful self-soothing patterns – some of the old and unhelpful habits you might be trying to change.

Different streams of counselling approach change differently. Gestalt therapy talks about achieving greater self-integration through self knowledge and self acceptance. This is what is called “the paradoxical theory of change”. People often come to counselling because they want to change an aspect of who they are. But change comes from better knowing yourself and through learning greater self acceptance. Self acceptance makes change less necessary and more possible (hence the paradox).

Where you are heading is ultimately a product of your daily habits. And reshaping these habits can be helped through knowledge, motivation, and emotional settledness. The last of these three building blocks is often the most overlooked, and might be the most crucial for some people.

If you are interested to explore this topic of the power of habits, have a look at Steven Covey's great book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People."

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