

Change Your Bad Habits to Good

“To get yourself started in a new direction, try the Three M’s”

By Robert Epstein

At the University of California, my students and I surveyed more than 2000 years of self-change techniques—perhaps most of the major self-change methods 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 self-change 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 tried to see which ones work best.

Three deserve special mention: they’re powerful, simple, and easy to learn. What’s more, individuals who have made successful changes in their lives—changes in eating habits, exercise regimens, career paths, coping strategies, and so on—often relied on one of more of these methods.

To get yourself started in a new direction, try the Three M’s’:

Modify Your Environment

People who have never tried this are astounded by the enormous effect it has. One of my students got herself bicycling every day simply by putting her bicycle in her doorway before

she left for school. When she returned home, that was the first thing she saw, and that’s all she needed to start pedaling away. I’ve known several people who have overcome nail-biting simply by buying 50 nail files and distributing them everywhere: in their pockets, their desks, and their bedrooms. With a nail file always within reach, they tended to groom rather than bite.

My children have used this simple technique many times. Justin, my 17-year-old, often places small fluorescent reminder notes at eye level on the inside frame of his bedroom door. A recent one read, “Remember to shampoo the dog on Saturday or Dad will kill you.” (Here he was using exaggeration to good effect.)

Psychologist Richard Stuart, who ultimately became director at Weight Watchers International, showed in the 1960s that overweight women could lose pounds by modifying both their eating behavior and “stimulus environment”—for example, eating from smaller plates and confining all food to the kitchen. To change *yourself*, change your world.

Monitor Your Behavior

I’ve been reading research studies on self-monitoring for 20 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.

Weigh yourself regularly and you may well start to lose weight. Keep a record of what you eat, and you'll probably start eating more wisely. Use gizmos. If you say "you know" too much, wear a golf counter on your wrist, and press the count button whenever you catch yourself say "you know." I'll bet you say it less frequently in just a few days. If a wrist counter is embarrassing, then make a small tear in a piece of paper in your pocket each time you say "you know." 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 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 fifth-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 similar study by Canadian researchers Thomas McKenzie and Brent Rushall showed that teenagers arrived more promptly at swim practice when they were given an attendance sheet to record their arrival times. Working with emotionally disturbed children, Sonya Carr of Southeastern Louisiana University and Rebecca Punzo, a New Orleans teacher, reported that self-monitoring improves academic performance in reading, mathematics, and spelling. Recent research even demonstrated that students will compose better stories given a simple checklist that includes elements of good writing. Dozens of studies have similar results, all spurred by heightening our awareness of our behavior.

Make Commitments

When you make a commitment to another person, you establish what psychologists call a contingency of reinforcement; you've automatically arranged for a reward if you comply and a punishment if you don't. It puts some pressure on you, and that's often just what you need.

For instance, if you want to exercise more, arrange to do it with a friend. If you don't show up, your friend will get angry, and that may be just the ticket to keep you punctual. Decades of research have demonstrated the power of this strategy. For example, in 1994, Dana Putnam and other researchers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University of Hawaii 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.

THERE'S GOOD NEWS HERE for all of us. We can meet many of the demands and overcome many of the challenges of life with simple skills—straightforward practices that anyone can master and that don't require willpower—in other words, with skill, not will.



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From *Treatment Today* (Summer 1998)