

Breaking the habit

You can achieve optimum health by looking at the habits that deprive you of it. **Pauline Lynch** invites you to take stock and focus on how you want to move forward

We are experiencing unprecedented times. We have been living with Covid-19 for many months and it appears that we are going to continue to live in its shadow for the foreseeable future. The implications for all our lives have been enormous. Many of us have experienced economic and personal loss - unemployment, financial difficulties or perhaps loss of loved ones either temporarily through isolation or quarantine, or tragically through death.

Beyond taking the advised precautions such as cocooning, social distancing, hand washing etc., much of what we do daily has been outside of our own control and we need more than ever to focus on what we can personally influence and control.

In terms of Covid-19, people with diabetes and in particular those with high blood glucose levels have been identified as at higher risk of complications if they get Covid-19, which means that we need more than ever to optimise our health from a physical, mental and spiritual aspect.

As the season changes into the autumn, a time where many make new changes and resolutions, we can use these recent challenges to motivate ourselves to make the necessary changes in our lives. This article invites you to take stock of your current daily habits and focus on how you want to move forward.

Pressing the reset button

How have you been doing for the past months? For many, this period has been a time where we have had a rare opportunity to take time, time for ourselves, time for our families and our loved ones. For some a time to review where priorities lie or should lie and to consider pressing the reset button.

Before we begin that process, let's briefly consider the past few months. What has been worthwhile for you in the uniqueness of your experience? What do you aspire to bring forward with you in your life and what do you want to change?

I suggest that you begin by looking at your life from different angles:

- **Physically:** Lifestyle, eg. eating, sleeping, exercise and diabetes self care
- **Emotionally:** relationships, family, support systems
- **Spiritually:** What is your purpose, what satisfies you, how do you rate the importance of hobbies and learning?

Considering these three angles, what behaviours or habits can you change that your future self will thank you for?

Using the above headings, make a plan that will help your body and your mind. Much has been written, information and health guidelines are widely available, but how do we apply this knowledge to

positively impact our health?

Most of all, be aware that it's very easy to slip into old routines and habits when the pace of life picks up. We often hear of people that have changed their eating and lifestyle habits and over time reverted back. Why is this?

I believe that many people do not really understand why or how unhealthy habits are formed and maintained and consequently our understanding of the process can create choice for us. I am going to introduce you to the Habit Loop which is an alternate way of looking at habits by Charles Duhigg. The Habit Loop is described in "The Power of Habit", and we are invited to get curious and notice in detail what happens around our unhealthy behaviours and habits.

He explains that we all carry out daily behaviours that are a series of habits. We get up in the morning and carry out a similar routine without much conscious thought. Indeed, life would be very wearying if we had to make an actual decision on each and every step of our lives, so much of our behaviour is automatic.

For instance, when we rise, we might wash our teeth, have a shower, get dressed and these are necessary and positive habits and we feel good when these are accomplished.

But what

about those habits that we want to change, the ones that sabotage our health. How do we approach this task? Have we tried and not succeeded or over time reverted to our old ways?

Duhigg (2012) identifies and breaks down our habits into a series of steps. For each habit there is a CUE leading to a ROUTINE leading to a REWARD

Cue

What are the circumstances, the setting or the situation in which the unhealthy behaviour occurs? The more you notice and name what is happening, the better. For instance, a client of mine wanted to lose weight. Discussion quickly revealed that she is a healthy eater all day but tended to snack on high-sugar food when sitting down to watch television in the evening. She undertook to pause when she got the urge and to ask herself questions like:

- What am I feeling at that moment eg. bored, tired, upset, emotional, lonely?
- What do I really need now – could it be some human contact or company to talk things through?
- Am I really hungry or thirsty, or is my blood glucose levels low?

Once the CUE happened, then comes the ROUTINE

Routine

What normally happened then? Was this at a specific time of the evening? Did she pay a visit to the kitchen cupboards and automatically choose junk foods?

Reward

What do you get from the routine, what is the reward? Many people will get a brief rush of feel-good hormones when eating chocolate for instance, but unfortunately it is short-lived. So, get curious about the reward that you get when your unhealthy habit turns up.

The key to changing the habit is to change the routine and/or find a different reward, the cue is going to happen in any case, but what happens next is partly your choice as long as the reaction is given thought.

Let's go back to my client. At evening time, her day is nearly done, she

sits down and turns on the television, then starts to feel the craving for the junk food (the cue). In between our sessions, she has noticed at that time that in fact she is finding it difficult to sit still, to relax and concentrate on a television programme. So, she hops up and heads to the kitchen cupboard to satisfy her craving (the routine).

However, over time, once she developed the awareness of what precisely was going on, she devised different strategies to occupy herself. Very crucially, she now knows that her response is merely a learned habit arising from feelings of tiredness at the end of her day. This is exacerbated if she is upset by events in her day.

She has now reached a level of awareness and by pausing and acknowledging the routine and rewards, she gives herself choice. What can she decide to do that will not sabotage her desire to lose weight and to eat more healthily?

She may decide to not have anything to eat since she now has choice. Additionally, she has decided that if she wants to eat something, she has a healthy snack, or a glass of water or sugar-free drink lined up. This pre-planning is crucial to success.

New strategies must be developed in advance of the cue/routine/behaviour so that the way forward is clear. Very often, the slightest change in the routine is enough to disrupt the process so it can be worthwhile to observe and give consideration to it.

Recording success

Many people will also find it helpful to record their success in a visual way. For my client, the reward started happening when she weighed herself at the end of the week. Others will find recording

each success on a chart helps, or placing an empty jar in an obvious place where something like a pebble or a bead can be added for each day or occasion that the positive change is made.

The visual of a chart or a jar provides the reward and is hard evidence of what can be accomplished and contributes to a personal belief in our ability to make positive and desired change.

This process is easy to describe but this does not mean it is easy to change. Real and lasting change takes time and practise. Crucially, remember to have some self-compassion, the habit that you are attempting to change has been developed for a good reason. Be willing to take it slowly. Each time that you successfully change the routine is another step to reaching your desired change. Taking small steps means that you will experience a sense of achievement and a belief that you can do it!

Acknowledge that we move at our own pace, and we will use different strategies and ways to get to where we want to go. Get curious and creative, become your own expert. Most of all, aim to achieve optimum health by looking at those habits that deprive you of it.

Lastly, consider the benefits of sharing your efforts and seeking support from friends, family or other likeminded individuals. We are social beings and need interaction with others. This became very evident during the lockdown period and came as a surprise to many.

Remember: if nothing changes, then nothing changes!

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