

To Your Health

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*Prescribing Health
and Wellness
Naturally*

Life Made Simpler

Previous newsletters have focused on an array of lifestyle-based topics including healthy eating, the importance of exercise, stress management, and sleep hygiene. Several principles are widely known, such as the importance of eating fruits and vegetables; yet, many people still do not eat adequate quantities of produce. For some, 8 hours of sleep feels great; but, despite the 6AM alarm and the best of intentions, they still do not get to bed before midnight. The question is why? The list of things we want to change and perhaps have tried to modify is never-ending. Behavioral modification is extremely challenging and will not be solved with a newsletter. My intention here is to begin a conversation about habits and the idea that if you can change your habits, you can change your life.

The content included in this newsletter will explore such questions as: why is it hard to form an enjoyable habit? Why do some adopt habits quickly while others resist? Why is it so hard to change a habit that we desperately want to change?

More valuable than asking the questions... this newsletter will help answer them by providing an awareness into the ways we adopt habits. Moreover, several suggestions will be presented to ease your struggle in the creation and maintenance of healthy habits.

Credit: Much of the information included here comes from an insightful book, [Better Than Before. Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives](#) by Gretchen Rubin. For those interested in a more in-depth discussion than what can be expressed in a newsletter, I highly recommend her book.

What is a Habit?

Put simply, a habit is freedom from decision making. Habits enable us to live our life without either ramping up our self-control or berating ourselves for lacking it.

A habit is a recurrent behavior that is context driven and occurs with minimal to no awareness or conscious intent. We acquire habits through frequent repetition.

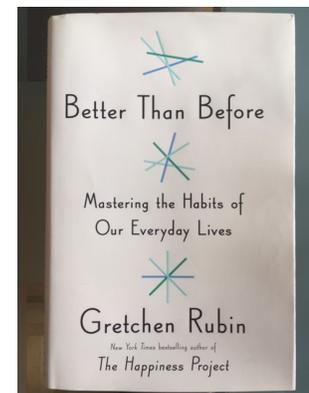
Habits are the opposite of obsessive behaviors

in that obsessive behaviors make life more difficult—they hinder our ability to perform activities. Conversely, habits free us up, enabling us to think about something else while performing the habit. For example, brushing teeth (habit) while planning the dinner menu.

Habits simplify life and they allow us to conserve our limited supply of willpower.

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Seven Habits of Health and Well-Being

- ◆ Eat and drink healthfully
- ◆ Exercise regularly
- ◆ Manage money well
- ◆ Disconnect and enjoy life
- ◆ Accomplish more/stop procrastinating
- ◆ Organize and simplify
- ◆ Maintain/promote relationships with friends, family, and/or spiritually



Cultivating a Habit Means Knowing Yourself

How do you respond to outer and inner expectations? In other words, if you make a pact with yourself to do something, do you honor that pact (inner expectation)? If you make a commitment to someone else, do you fulfill that commitment (outer expectation)? How you answer these questions will determine which of four categories you fall into. People in each category develop habits utilizing different strategies. Therefore, if you know yourself, you can focus on habit-forming tactics that best fit your personality.

From most common to least common

Category 1: **Obligiers**

⇒ Respond to outer expectations; struggle with inner expectations

Category 2: **Questioners**

⇒ Question all expectations and only meet those they feel are justified

Category 3: **Upholders**

⇒ Respond to all expectations

⇒ These people find it easiest to form habits

Category 4: **Rebels**

⇒ Resist all expectations

⇒ These people have the hardest time forming habits

Really Get to Know Yourself

Take a moment to decide which characteristics best describe your preferences:

- ◆ Are you a morning person or a night owl?
- ◆ Do you prefer to work steadily to get the job done or does waiting until the last minute energize you? ****note:** this is different from procrastination, when waiting to the last minute causes stress.

Honest answers will help you figure out the habit-forming strategies that will work for you.



- ◆ Do you like familiarity or newness?
- ◆ Do you prefer simplicity or more of an abundant atmosphere?
- ◆ Do you get a sense of satisfaction from finishing something or do you prefer to open/start something new?
- ◆ Do you like to take small steps or big ones?

Four Pillars for Changing Habits

1. Quantitative Monitoring

Specifically record your actions. Example: if you are trying to develop an exercise habit, use a Fitbit.

Works well for Upholders and Questioners.

Obligers need outside monitoring systems, such as a workout buddy to help them stay on track.

Rebels will only monitor if they want to monitor.

2. Scheduling

Commit to a new habit by putting it on your calendar. This helps guard against procrastination and 'forces' us to just do it.

3. Foundation

Focus first on habits that build a strong foundation to keep you from being overwhelmed. For most people a strong foundation consists of a healthy diet, exercise, adequate sleep, and an organized work/home space.

4. Accountability

Create consequences for your actions or lack of actions.

Internal consequences, such as deadlines, work well for upholders as well as questioners if the consequences make sense to them. External consequences, such as approval from a trainer or nutritionist, are highly beneficial for obligers.

Start Big or Start Small, But Start Now!

It is harder to start than to continue, so once you decide on the habit you wish to create, take the plunge. Once you start your new habit, try not to stop. You lose momentum, may feel guilty, and can have a hard time restarting.

Sometimes we need that extra psychological push that a new beginning offers. Less mental energy

may be required if you start your habit when another big change is in the works, such as a new job, a new relationship, or even returning from a vacation. A birthday, New Year's, a new week or month are all opportune times to embark on a new habit.

Moderation vs. Abstinence

Some prefer an occasional indulgence (moderators) while others do well with the 'cold turkey' method (abstainers). Moderators find an indulgence strengthens their resolve and prevents feelings of rebellion. Abstainers find total deprivation conserves both energy and willpower. An indulgence thwarts their resolve, making them want more as opposed to quelling the desire.

Make it Convenient

Simple concept: people are more likely to do something if it is convenient, in terms of effort, timing, and decision-making. For example, want to develop a habit to regularly workout at the gym; join one located between home and work.

Conversely, to break a bad habit, try making it inconvenient or costly. For example, to break the dessert habit, do not keep sweets in the house.

Treat Yourself

Developing healthy habits is challenging. Although counterintuitive, the idea to reward 'good' behavior is ill-advised. Rewards subconsciously link a habit with a negative feeling: *I am suffering so I should get a reward*. Rewards also signal a stopping point for the habit: *I made it this far, now I can quit doing it*.

Instead, try treating yourself. The difference: treats are not earned or justified. They are not something you work towards; but, are intermittent gifts to yourself just because they make you happy. Treats energize and bring contentment. One note, avoid using food or TV as a treat because they can produce negative feelings of guilt, thus ultimately making it more of a punishment than a treat.

Some of my favorite treats: reading a good book, going for a walk with a friend, and caring for shelter dogs.

What do you consider a treat??



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