

# ***Please Try This at Home***

## ***Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life***

### **Six Questions that Will Change You**

What have you been trying to change for just about ever? Nail biting? Binge drinking? Gossiping? Skin picking? Downing a liter of Dr. Pepper a day? Staying up too late? Whatever those habits are, minor annoyances or debilitating addictions, there are reasons we haven't been able to change them.

Using the following six questions to take a closer look at what keeps us from change can help in at least two ways. We might finally discover what's been in the way of our change so we can do something effective about it. Or, exploring what all would be involved in the change can help us to decide whether it's really worth the effort. If not, we can stop nagging ourselves about it and get on to other things. Either way, it's better than being stuck wanting change and not being able to get there.

#### **1. What's wrong with my habit?**

I'm the first to admit it. Change is difficult and uncomfortable even when it's positive and good! So if we're going to touch it even with a 10 ft. pole, there's got to be some pretty darned good reasons to do so. Often, people don't change because they've considered the reasons for change and not found them all that compelling. The change might make life a bit better, but not enough to make it worth the pain of changing!

Other times, there are lots of compelling reasons to change, but we just haven't taken the time to notice them all and add up what they would mean for us. In this case, the trick might be to make a list of the effects that our unwanted habit has on our lives and the lives of those we care about, both currently and in the future. We might need to ask those who are important to us how our habit affects them. Only then will we have enough information about the effects of the change to decide whether it's worth all the bother.

#### **2. What do I really care about?**

Now, say we have a list of the negative effects of our habit on ourselves and others a mile long. But none of the effects really tap into something we care about. In that case, the change might just not be worth it for us. Sure, the experts say that marijuana causes lung cancer, paranoia, decrease in brain function, birth defects, yada, yada, yada. But if what we care most about right now is getting a small break from painful circumstances by feeling something different, let's face it, none of the medical reasons to quit smoking pot are going to feel that compelling.

So if we're feeling like we really do want to change, but just can't get the uumph to do it, we might need to find a way to tie the reasons to change to something we really care about. For example, I recently changed my bad habit of not drinking enough water. For years I'd been told about the benefits of drinking water and I simply ignored all the expert advice. But when I started feeling tired a lot of the time, that cut into my ability to be productive and present with people who are important to me—two things I care about very much. Suddenly, I was motivated to drink water because it tapped into things that *mattered* to me. So the key here is to find ways

to link the change to something that really matters to us right now, or to something in the future that we can still care about right now.

### **3. How do I stay motivated?**

So we've inventoried the effects of our habit on us and others and we've tied them to things that really matter to us. Right now, we feel really motivated to change. It feels worth the effort. But those of us who have failed to change in the past have probably noticed that this feeling of being motivated that sets us on the road to change can be pretty short lived. Meanwhile, changing habits is a long process! Yes, I've known some people who somehow find sustained internal motivation to make huge, long-term changes on their own. But most of us need some help! We need 1) other people who care about us to 2) know about the change we are trying to make and then 3) hold some of our motivation for us. Then, when our personal well of motivation runs dry, they can encourage us and remind us about why we want to change, handing some of our motivation back to us when we run out.

So who could we tell about the change we are making? Friends? Family? A counselor? A support or AA group? A spiritual director? What specific things could we ask them to do to support our change process? Regular encouraging check-ins? Being there for us to call when we are about to return to our habit? Doing activities with us that help us avoid our unwanted habits? The more supporters we've got and the more specifically we can ask for help with our change, the better our chances of sustaining the motivation we need to stick with it.

### **4. How does my habit work?**

Once we've got motivation and support, we need to develop a really clear understanding of how our unwanted habit works. Behavior researchers talk about the fact that we don't continue to do a behavior unless there is some reward to it, no matter how weird or subtle the reward might be. So to stop a habit, we need to figure out how it has been rewarding us so that we can find other ways to get an equivalent reward.

We might start by looking at the last 3-5 times we engaged in our habit. What was the situation? What were we feeling when we decided to do the habit? How did we feel while we were doing it? How about after it was over? What were the pleasant, rewarding things we experienced along the way? What locations, situations, feelings, or people remind us of our habit and make us want to experience the rewards that it brings? Talking with supporters can be a great way to increase understanding of how our habits work. They may be able to see things we don't because we are so used to our habits that it is hard to see them clearly.

### **5. What can I do instead?**

After researching our habit, learning what it does for us, and identifying the situations that set us up to repeat it, we're now equipped to find alternative ways of receiving the rewards that we used to get from our habits. If smoking used to give us a break when we were about to engage in a difficult work task, maybe now we can let ourselves take non-smoking breaks whenever we have a craving. If gossiping makes us feel important because we always have something to share, maybe we can still share good news about others while also subscribing to current events resources that give us interesting, but less damaging things to share. If cutting lets us feel sufficiently punished to buy us a little relief from the fear that someone else will punish us in

ways we can't control, maybe snapping our wrists with a rubber band, holding an ice cube, or running up a steep hill could do the same kind of thing without the scars and guilt.

In addition to alternative rewards, we'll also need ways to avoid those situations that make it almost impossible *not* to return to our habit. Skin pickers might use the night light in the bathroom rather than the overhead light so it's harder to see the blemishes they'd be tempted to scratch or squeeze. Cola addicts might avoid the carbonated drink aisle at the store or only shop after drinking 32oz of something healthy, but flavorful. The more ways we have of re-routing ourselves from situations that would return us to our habit, the better chance we'll have of forming new habits that solidify our changes. Then, we can keep using our support systems to help us keep going with these alternatives until they become second nature to us and the old habit is mostly a thing of the past.

## 6. How do I recover from failure?

Now even those of us who've done it all—we're super motivated, have great support, have a clear understanding of how our habits work, and have a long and vetted list of alternative rewards and habits—can still sometimes fall into old habits. We run into our drug dealer at the DMV, of all places, on a day when we haven't slept, we've lost our job, and just discovered that the basement's flooded. We're feeling like a failure already and suddenly we find ourselves wanting to fail if only to prove how valid our "I'm a failure" feeling is. That day, after months or years of success, the drugs get the better of us.

The key here is to remind ourselves even before a failure happens that *failure is a key part of the change process*, specifically, the quality assurance part. Failure provides us valuable information about the weak spots in our change plan that we can use to create new areas of strength. From the drug example above, we could learn that we need an alternative habit for times when we want to feel destructive, but don't actually want to destroy everything that's important to us: maybe playing a video game we are horrible at, buying some cheap plates to smash, or eating food that tastes awful. Failure simply says, "Here's an area in need of a new alternative or a stronger reward."

The important thing is to see failure as *part* of the change process, not the *end* of it. If we believe that it's the end, we are likely to make it so, throwing all our progress out the window and abandoning ourselves and our loved ones to our nasty habit. When we see failure as information that informs the overall change process, then it's not so difficult to return to the change questions, reminding ourselves of the negative effects of our habit and what we really care about so that we can jump start ourselves back onto the road to change. Staying engaged with the change, not arriving at "perfection," is the key to long term transformation.

If you've been trying to change for awhile and are having a hard time, chances are that you need to explore one or more of these six questions a bit more fully. Please know that you are not alone in this. Wrestling with these aspects of change is a big part of being human! If you or someone you know would like some help navigating through these change questions, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email [info@jenniferdiebel.com](mailto:info@jenniferdiebel.com).*

Thanks for reading!

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