

You Can Change!

Are you trying to lose weight, eat more healthfully, or stop smoking? Have you tried to change but not been able to do so? Do you chalk it up to lack of willpower? When we try to change behavior, most of us get caught in “the willpower trap”—the fundamental belief that personal motivation is everything. When we fail, we decide we need to try harder, which often results in depression rather than change. That is why more than 98% of Americans fail to change their behavior (Patterson et al. 2011). Luckily, the research shows that willpower has very little to do with whether we can kick our lifelong bad habits. You *can* change. You just need more than willpower. Professional speaker and facilitator Stacy D. Nelson, a VitalSmarts® master trainer who helps people achieve bottom-line results and become measurably more vital, shares some change strategies.

Turn Accomplices into Friends

Bad habits are always a team sport—we usually have accomplices who motivate our vices. Peer pressure and the influence of friends and family have extremely powerful effects on behavior change. For example, Harvard social scientist Nicholas Christakis, MD, PhD, MPH, discovered that obesity is partly infectious: Having obese friends increases your chances of following suit by 57% (Christakis & Fowler 2007). A “friend” is defined as a person who influences us to stop a bad habit and start a good one. An “accomplice,” on the other hand, is a person who influences us to start a bad habit or stop a good one. The bottom line is that *nobody is as smart as all of us*. We need others to support us. You may need to avoid accomplices or purposely search out and add new friends who will support your change goals.

Get a Coach or Mentor

Coaches are crucial to behavior change. We all succeed with a little help from others. People with a half-dozen active friends who play the role of coach or mentor are almost 40% more likely to succeed than those with fewer than a half-dozen friends (Patterson et al. 2011). Accountability is a huge factor in following up and following through with plans for change.

Coaches or mentors do more than simply encourage you. They assist you in getting the help, information, and resources you require to make lasting change.

Control Your Space

You can change your environment in ways that make good behavior easier and bad behavior harder. Researchers found that people eat an average of 92% of whatever they put on their plate, regardless of how big the plate is (Van Ittersum & Wansink 2013). So, swap your 12-inch plates for 9-inch plates, and the 3-inch reduction will help you consume 33% fewer calories.

To help with your environment:

- **Build fences.** Create rules that cut you off from bad behavior.
- **Manage distance.** Bring good things close and move temptations far away.

- **Use tools.** Recruit computers, smartphones, and other devices to help you change.
- **Use cues.** Post visible tools to record your progress.

Engage Six Sources of Influence

Whether you succeed or fail at making changes is not a matter of luck or willpower. There's the science that explains the "why" behind success and failure. Kerry Patterson and colleagues explained 20 years of research on successful changes in *Change Anything: The New Science of Personal Success* (Patterson et al. 2011).

Behavior is driven by two powerful factors: motivation (is it worth it?) and ability (can I do it?). These two driving forces are expressed across three domains: personal, social, and structural. When you combine the factors and domains, you end up with six sources of influence. These can either work against you, which often happens when you don't know what they are or for you, when you can make them work in your favor.

To view a fun and enlightening summary of these six sources, go to YouTube and look for "Blind and Outnumbered" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=4o4vYMdE5gU).

References

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