

Using positive psych to change old habits

DR ILONA BONIWELL DISCUSSES HOW POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY CAN BE APPLIED TO YOUR MEMBERS.

Habits are akin to taking the beaten path in that they require little effort and with time, they grow stronger and stronger. Despite our knowledge of the beneficial effects of habits such as healthy eating and exercise on our well-being, self-esteem and overall quality of life, that knowledge alone offers insufficient motivation for making changes happen.

BARRIERS

Some of the barriers to making successful change can be found in our beliefs, low levels of self-regulation and the complexity of the change process itself. For example, whether we have a fixed or flexible mindset can determine how much effort we will invest in making a change happen and how quickly we give up when experiencing a setback.

Individuals with a fixed mindset believe that their capacities are innate, while

those with a flexible mindset believe that their present achievements are the result of effort rather than genes¹. Furthermore, given that recent research finds self-regulation to work much like a muscle, it is no wonder that a hard day at work can deplete our willpower, resulting in us giving up on our best intentions².

We also need to be aware that any change process has to go through a number of stages if we are to hope for a successful outcome³.

Positive psychology – the science of happiness and well-being – advocates approaching change, not from the perspective of difficulty, but from the perspective of capitalising on what we already have by using our strengths and activating positive experiences.

POSITIVE REMINISCING

It may sound like common sense, but unless we enjoy our new habit, we are unlikely to stick to it. If the habit you are trying to instil is exercise, you might like to suggest to your members a strategy

called positive reminiscing. This involves bringing to mind all their successful experiences of exercising from the past, letting the images come to their memory and seeing them as vividly as they can.

SAVOURING

Another strategy that is conducive to enjoyment is savouring, or being fully immersed in, attending to and appreciating the current experience. How often do we mindlessly swallow our breakfast, or even run on an exercise machine while thinking of something else. Savouring requires us to fully engage with what we are doing, focusing on what we find most enjoyable.

HOPE

Hope, or a belief in a possible beneficial outcome, can be activated by visualising one's best possible self over a period of time. Ask your members to consider a desired future image of themselves – imagining that everything has gone the way they hoped, that they have achieved

Type of savouring	Method
Sharing with others	You can seek out other people to share the experience with or tell others how much you value a particular moment.
Memory-building	Taking mental photographs of the event and reminiscing about it later.
Self-congratulation	Telling yourself how impressed others are with what you are doing and remembering how long you had waited for this to happen.
Sharpening perceptions	Focusing on certain elements of an immediate experience and blocking out others.
Absorption	Letting yourself become totally immersed in doing something and trying not to think; just sense what's going on.

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what they aimed for, that they have succeeded in making a particular change happen and their best potentials have come to be realised.

Ideally, they need to write about and vividly imagine themselves in that future and continue engaging with this technique for the course of four weeks⁴. This is likely to increase hope, which is a primary source of positive affect and psycho-physiological arousal. Hope is a strong emotional driver of intentional change.

STRENGTHS

Using our strengths is something that generally comes effortlessly to us. When we do what we are good at, we feel authentic and energised. Let's consider how our strengths can be harnessed in service of our intended changes.

First, ask your members to visit www.authentic happiness.org and take the 40-minute VIA survey. At the end, it will help them identify their top strengths and will provide them with comprehensive feedback. Encourage them to use these strengths more often during the following week and to note how this makes them feel.

The following week they could go one step further and every day for the next seven days, use one of their top five strengths in a way that they have not used it before⁵. For example, they could apply these strengths to a change challenge at hand. So, if creativity is one of their top strengths and healthy eating is a challenge, they could try cooking a novel meal from only the healthiest ingredients.

SUPPORT

Finally, support mechanisms such as positive relationships often underlie a successful change. Our friends and families can be an impediment or a driver for our intentions. Strategies such as active-constructive responding can assist in developing more positive relationships:

Researchers have discovered that what distinguishes good relationships from poor ones is not how the partners react to problems, but how they welcome good news in each other's lives⁶.

There are a number of ways in which we can react to our partner succeeding in stopping smoking, for example. Very often, we adopt a passive-constructive

strategy – we acknowledge their success and move on: "Well done, dear." At times good news can even trigger negative emotional reactions in us, such as jealousy, envy, anger or anxiety, and when that happens we may react in an unconstructive manner.

An example of an active-destructive response could be: "And what am I supposed to do now that you have stopped, go outside every time I smoke?" A passive-destructive strategy would be to undermine someone's success by simply ignoring it, pretending it didn't happen: "Is dinner ready?"

Research shows that relationships that favour all of the above strategies are less close, supportive and trusting. So how can we respond to good news in an active-constructive way? First of all, we can aim to understand what happened – through paying close attention to the person, listening, asking questions, being interested and enthusiastic. The second stage is celebration and capitalising on the success – opening a bottle of champagne, calling one's close relatives and friends to tell them the news, doing something together that you always wanted to, but never got around to.

Until exercise professionals understand the psychology of behavioural change and have the capacity to implement some of these strategies, there will be a continuing struggle to help customers make the long term changes they are looking for. 🍷

For references, see www.fitpro.com/references

USEFUL RESOURCES

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- Shahar TB (2007), *Happier*, New York: McGraw Hill.
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