

Review of Session Three - Making a Firm Decision

Thanks for attending Session Three

Thank you for attending Powerful Brain. Healthy Body. I hope you are excited to be learning how to go about changing your enduring habits so that as a natural way of living, you consistently give your body what it needs. In sessions one and two, we focused exclusively with step one (honest evaluation) of a three-step process. It can be a bit frustrating to invest this much energy exclusively in the first step. Although it may even seem like we are not moving forward very fast, it's actually quite helpful to take 2 -3 weeks to evaluate and plan before rushing onto subsequent steps. In session three's material, we finished up our discussion of the first step, explained why this process is so important in the process of new habit acquisition, and then moved onto the second step of the change process.

What insights did you gain as you completed your homework last week?

What are you learning from your homework that helps you prepare for successful change? At this point, the following issues should be coming into clearer focus for you:

1. Your emotional eating patterns

At this point of the change process, you should be gaining a clear awareness of your emotional eating patterns. During the week, observe your emotional eating patterns in action and see if any interesting insights emerge. In next week's session, we will be training you on specific strategies to change those behaviors. We will teach you the tools you will use to disengage. For now, when faced with the urge to eat in an unhealthy fashion due to an emotional eating habit, acknowledge the urge using the following statement: Right now I want to (fill in the phrase) merely because that's a habit I've developed and the choice is actually mine.

2. The underlying reasons driving your unhealthy habits

It is not unusual to use eating as a way to accomplish something other than to give you body what it needs to be healthy. For example, sometimes people use their extra weight as a mechanism to shield them from things they are uncomfortable with . . . physical exertion, sexual intimacy, demanding relationships, etc. Many people are not fully aware of the underlying emotional dynamics that may be driving their unhealthy behavior. It's only when they start considering making a change that these uncomfortable feelings begin to surface. If you are experiencing discomfort as the time for a decision looms closer, it may help to ask yourself if your present course of action is getting you what you really want and if not, why you are continuing down the same worn old path. If you find those reasons to be particularly deep-seated and resistant to change, you may want to consider accessing the EAP for some individual counseling on this issue.

3. Ways you may have sabotaged or undermined your efforts in the past

Were you able to identify your patterns of sabotage? You have them, we all do. This week, observe yourself to see if any of the old patterns of sabotage surface. If they do, you might want to start considering what patterns of behavior would be useful to replace the patterns of sabotage. We will address this subject in more detail next week.

4. What there is about you personally that might help you succeed at changing your habits?

Each person has gifts and abilities that, if recognized, can provide hope and create confidence. Some might include:

- Success in some other part of your life
- Your stubborn determination once you become committed
- Your clear mind
- Your emotional intelligence – the ability to connect with your feelings
- Your trust in the power of your humanity
- Your common sense
- Your genuine desire to achieve something better
- Your willingness to take things one step at a time
- Your humility – willingness to be taught
- Your immense capacity to love
- Your supportive, nurturing relationships

Please remember that you already have everything that you need to be successful at this important undertaking. It's all within you right now. You don't need anything else beyond a clearer understanding of the process and a willingness to keep your feet on the path. No one needs to fail! You can do this!

5. What you really, really want

At this point, what you really, really want for your future should be quite clear to you. Your "vision of the future" that you created last week will be an important tool and will be used as a part of the process to acquire your new habits.

A new way to look at habits

What is a habit? A habit is an enduring pattern of behavior that has been practiced to the point that it has become predictable for you. A habit functions almost automatically, without the need for conscious thought or control. It becomes your default response. You have habits of thinking, habits of feeling, habits of behaving and habits of physical response.

What does a habit look like?

At its most elemental level, a habit is merely a neural pathway in your brain. That's really all there is to it. A habit is a physical, neurological bridge, formed in response to the chemical process your brain uses to connect one part of your brain to other parts of your brain. These neural pathways are naturally changing all of the time. Those that are frequently practiced grow stronger, more automatic, and become the basis for enduring patterns of behavior. Many habit pathways involve several parts of the brain and trigger responses in our thinking, our feelings, and our body's physiology simultaneously. Because these responses seem to happen spontaneously, without conscious effort or control, they tend to operate below the radar of conscious awareness. Remember, at any point in time, the span of your conscious awareness seems to be about seven, +/- two. Much of what you do is somewhat automatic and does not require high levels of conscious awareness.

Habits have triggers or cues

Our habit pathways have triggers or cues. Remember Pavlov's dog, the famous study you learned about if you took high school psychology? Pavlov hooked a dog up to a contraption that measured when the dog salivated. Sure enough, when presented with the sight of dog food, the salivation response was triggered and the dog started salivating. In this experiment, the researchers began to ring a bell at the same time the food was presented. After just a few practices, the dog began to salivate at the sound of the bell even though the food was not yet in sight.

Many of your food habits function in a similar fashion – your urge to eat is triggered by visual cues (the sight of a donut), contextual cues (a large plate), or physiological cues (first pangs of hunger or thirst). Once you come in contact with the trigger – you automatically experience a physical response, emotional response and/or a behavioral response.

Once habit pathways are formed, even complex behaviors, like driving your car, are mostly accomplished on "automatic pilot" with ease. Unlike beginning drivers who have to think their way through each step, experienced drivers go through the motions quite automatically. When the brake lights for the car immediately in front of you light up, your foot automatically leaves the gas and engages the brake. When you are driving home, you automatically know what direction to turn at every intersection. You don't have to read the street signs or mentally rehearse the directions in order to find your way home. In fact, there may be times when you arrive home and don't even have a conscious memory of what transpired along the way.

Where does conscious control fit into the picture?

Fortunately your brain contains a cerebral cortex with the capacity to evaluate, prioritize, value and choose. Just because many of these processes are automatic doesn't mean you don't have any say in what you do. If your spouse calls as you are driving home and requests that you stop at the store for milk, you turn towards the store rather than towards your home. You are not a preprogrammed robot without any say in what you choose or how you will respond. However, your habit pathways simplify your routine responses and allow you to focus your awareness (which is a limited commodity) on what is needed to function in a complex world. Otherwise, you would be continually overwhelmed.

What makes habit pathways challenging?

Not all your habits are functional – the consequences of some enduring habits consistently cause you difficulty. Dysfunctional habits are sometimes called self-defeating habits because they are patterns of behavior that consistently create less than optimal outcomes. Examples of this type of habit might include ineffective problem-solving styles that are used over and over in relationships, unhealthy eating habits, anger management habits, or thought habits that result in depression or anxiety.

Why do we stick with habits that are self-defeating and cause us difficulty?

Our propensity to continue to behave in self-defeating behaviors, even when it becomes apparent that our

behavior is interfering with our happiness, is one of the most interesting aspects of human nature. Why don't we simply adjust what we are doing and save ourselves from the problems our repetitive behavior is causing us to experience? The reason is that it is not that easy to change our habit pathways once they become entrenched and automatic. Somehow, our entrenched habits seem natural and almost automatic to us. Even when we feel remorse over the consequences of our habitual actions, we are still likely to behave the same way in the future. At times it almost seems as if the habitual sequences of cue—urge—act, cue—urge—act are so well entrenched as to be beyond our capacity to create lasting change. We sometimes even question our ability to steer life into healthy, life enhancing habits.

We're changing all the time, naturally, but it's when we attempt to make self-directed change that we frequently run into problems. Perhaps our culture has trained us to use ineffective strategies that require us to try too hard in ways that just don't work.

With the development of new, more powerful tools such as the functional MRI, research on the functioning of the brain has made rapid strides in the past 5 years. We now know so much more than we did previously about how habits function, how they are formed, and how to effectively create new habit pathways. This is exciting new stuff and creates immense opportunities for change and growth.

You can't just stop a habit pathway from firing

Perhaps one of the reasons we have struggled with self-defeating habits is that we have merely tried to stop them. That's the same thing as trying to stop the firing of the habit pathway once the trigger has fired it. Telling ourselves over and over again to "STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT!" is a woefully inadequate strategy. Even if you form a fixed determination to never repeat the habit in the future, you may find that stopping the habit is extremely difficult to pull off. This is why in the last session, we talked about how focusing exclusively on what we don't want rarely results in lasting change. Remember, that which we resist, persists! What is much easier instead is to grow a new habit pathway that is attached to the same trigger as the old pathway. If we practice that pathway (in a special way) until it becomes automatic and gains predominance, the new habit will become the easy choice.

Growing a new habit is much easier than stopping on old one

It's much easier to replace a self-defeating habit with a new habit that you genuinely want to become your automatic, natural way of life. Basically, this involves growing a new pathway in your brain rather than trying to stop an old pathway from firing. Remember, a habit pathway is an actual physical connection. Growing a new habit pathway strong enough to take over automaticity (no longer requiring conscious effort) generally takes an average of 21 days of practice. (42 days if you practice the new habit every other day, 147 days if you practice it once a week.) Merely attempting to stop or extinguish a habit takes at least 6 times longer.

Next week we will focus on a specific strategy of habit practice, which is step three of the change process. We will present this unique practice strategy to ensure that your new habit pathway becomes strong and dominant in your life. Using this strategy, you can acquire an automatic habit in far less time than the usual or normal methods of practice.

How do you get a new pathway started?

Getting a new pathway started is easy. The first step is honest evaluation -- does this sound familiar? You have already learned how to engage your brain in a genuine, believable recognition that your enduring health-related habit is not going to give you what you really want. You have already started to clarify what you really want instead. Please keep in mind the following key factors in the process of getting a new habit pathway started:

1. The depth or intensity of your realization of the need to change. You get a new habit pathway started when it really matters to you and is not merely an academic question. Honestly evaluate the good and the bad, the pros and the cons of each alternative. Don't be afraid of the truth. Invest yourself with an honest, searching self evaluation.
2. The activation of a strong emotional response. Basically, the task is to get down to your core feelings about what you really, really want. The research on brain malleability strongly suggests that to get a new habit pathway started, it's important to engage a strong emotional response.
 - Anticipation and hope for the future are powerful emotional responses.
 - Absolutely clarity about what you want -- your vision of the future -- activates anticipation and hope.
 - To get a new habit pathway started, it's useful to simultaneously activate the reasoning center in the frontal cortex as well as the pleasure and the emotion centers in the mid-brain. This creates a release of brain chemicals that have a big impact on the growth of new habit pathways.

How do you complete the connection?

A new habit pathway really connects at the point that you make a firm decision. This is why the second step of this change process is called, "Make a firm decision." There is something about making a firm decision to acquire a specific new habit that connects all the dots in your brain. It's almost as if there is a handshake going on in your head that connects the trigger to the new behavior pattern. At this point, the new pathway, though real and physical, is still weak. It has not yet acquired dominance and is not yet your automatic response. It will require 21 days of practice to accomplish dominance and automaticity. However, the good news is that a new habit pathway has already grown and is now available for you to start strengthening. (This statement assumes that you have already conducted a searching, honest evaluation and have already reached a firm decision about acquiring a specific new habit in the place of the old, self-defeating habit.)

Please key your attention to the "firm" part of the decision. There is a big difference between a clear, well reasoned, firm decision and a generalized, fuzzy, inclination. Making a decision is a different process than merely considering your options. Making a firm decision requires that you make a clear choice. Those who find themselves spinning with "I should/ought to/must . . ." rarely start a new habit pathway because they rarely achieve a firm decision. You can sense the difference in firmness between the following two statements:

"I have made the firm decision to give my body what it needs to be healthy every day"

"I really ought to eat better."

Are you ready to make a firm decision?

This is an important question to ask yourself. You are the only one who can answer this question. Assuming you have been sufficiently honest in your evaluations thus far in the training, you are probably about ready to make a life changing decision about your health habits. To help you clarify this point, please use the readiness to change ruler one more time.

What if I have specific areas where I am trying, but running into trouble?

Don't worry, this is to be expected and is normal. During the week, observe the areas that are causing you distress or difficulty. We will train you how to address these problem areas using focused practice.

Complete your homework assignment. It walks you step by step through this process.

Your homework for this week asks you to carefully consider a few questions to help you make this firm decision. You will notice that part of a firm decision involves identifying the action steps you will take to implement your decision. It also involves scheduling when, where, and how you will accomplish each action step. Remember your commitment to "do it, not merely think about doing it." This is where the proverbial "rubber meets the road." Come prepared next week with a firm decision in hand and learn how to practice the new habit pathway until it becomes dominant and automatic.