Macquarie Life Evolve

A healthy attitude
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There is a lot of discussion these days about the health and well being of Australians. Changing behaviour involves the action of doing something differently and understanding the reasons why change is required – and then putting both into action.

From quitting smoking, to healthier eating or undertaking more regular exercise, most of us have a list of behaviours we would like to change. These changes include either starting a new, healthier behaviour or stopping an unhealthy behaviour. For many people, the change often takes hold for a short time but then slowly reverts to the troublesome ‘old’ behaviour. The cycle of disillusionment sets in and changing that negative behaviour goes into the ‘too hard basket’.

What then, are effective ways to change negative behaviour on a permanent basis to make healthier behaviour a lifelong habit? Researchers have looked long and hard at behavioural change from a number of different approaches. The psychology of change behaviour involves integrating healthy habits into everyday habits.

One step leads to another

Changing behaviour might seem like a big task, but it can be achieved relatively easily through simple and systematic mind focus. The steps are sequential and build on each other. Very few people succeed in jumping from the first step to the last. The person who goes ‘cold turkey’ with cigarettes or attempts to run a marathon without any lead-up training is likely to fail.

The first step is recognising that certain behaviour needs to change. The next step is changing thoughts. A simple starting point is to ask yourself about the change you would like to make that will improve your life:

- what would this look like?
- who could help you to begin this change? What could the first step be?
- what might you be doing differently if you no longer had this problem behaviour?
- how would you see yourself differently?

Most people can embrace small changes even if it is thinking about the change. After all, thinking about change is already a step in the right direction and it forms the basis for change to follow.
What impacts behaviour?

Knowledge and awareness
People change more readily when they have knowledge about what they need to change and have a clear understanding of what to expect through the change process. Providing information is the first step towards influencing behaviour change.

Self-efficacy
People with low self-confidence or self-efficacy are likely to give up easily when facing a setback. Recruiting the support of friends, family and health professionals can be an important step to activating and maintaining change. These people can provide resources and moral support.

If you think you can do it, chances are you will be able to put the changes into action. This is where the mind plays a big part in the change process.

Habit and routine
Breaking bad habits requires an emotional stir-up. Habits or routine can be key factors in influencing behaviour. The more we repeat a particular behaviour, the more automatic it becomes. As time passes and the behaviour is undertaken more frequently, habit becomes the key factor driving our actions. For example, the first time you visit a gym you may find it difficult. However, after a few visits, you may find it becomes more enjoyable and you may even be left feeling energised and wanting to return.

Emotions and feelings
Emotions can have a strong influence on our behaviour, both conscious and unconscious. When you are working to change a negative behaviour, it is important that you can identify how feelings trigger behaviour. When negative emotions arise and lead to unhelpful behaviours like binge eating, alcohol consumption or cigarette smoking, extra support is required. Knowing when to ask for help is important and calling on help at an early stage is wiser than waiting or hoping for the problem to go away.

Goal setting
- By setting clear goals you can plan for concrete actions. Goals should be expressed as the behaviour/s you intend to do. Distinguish your behaviour goal from wishful or hopeful thinking. Saying ‘I wish I could exercise more’ is generally not helpful. Stating the goal as ‘I will exercise by walking three times a week for 20 to 30 minutes’ is a clear and achievable task.
- Make this goal realistically challenging. Not too easy and not too hard. Setting a goal that is too hard will disillusion you and setting it too easy will not inspire much effort.
- Goals should incorporate your interests. Wherever possible, do something you like that also reinforces the change you are trying to make.
- Goals should be rewarded. It is important that there is some evidence of all your hard work so make sure rewards are built into the changed behaviour. They do not have to be expensive, just something you find enjoyable.
- Goals should be achievable. Break down the behaviour that you want to change into steps that you can achieve. Have mini goals like cutting down on sugar, smoking less cigarettes per day or walking during your lunch break.

You have the choice to change the way you think and act. Starting small and breaking down the steps of behavioural change will lead to lasting and improved health benefits.
Changing health behaviours

Weight management

Realising the need to lose weight and taking the first steps to do so can be overwhelming and challenging. You may have tried to lose weight in the past with levels of success. This may have led to feelings of defeat and low motivation.

Successful weight management takes perseverance. Breaking old habits and replacing them with a healthier new lifestyle is the key. It may be necessary to change the way you approach your weight loss, for example, through goal setting, increasing your physical activity or changing dietary habits.

It is often tempting to try a quick-fix. Most fad or crash diets require significant changes to eating habits which are not sustainable in the long-term. To achieve sustainable weight loss with the associated health benefits, eating habits need to be altered, along with increasing the amount of physical exercise you do over the long-term.

Research has revealed three major reasons why people maintain poor weight control behaviours

1. People are influenced by the sight and smell of food.
   If food is around, they eat it. Have you found yourself eating even when you are not hungry? The availability of food rather than hunger, triggers eating. There are also many indirect stimuli that are linked to eating. For example, sitting in front of the television or reading is often associated with food for many people. Nibbling becomes a habit which over time, leads to weight gain.

2. Many people learn poor eating habits from an early age.
   The habit of overeating is maintained because it is enjoyable or it may provide temporary relief for emotional distress like anxiety, depression or anger. Think about the possible reasons you might eat even when you are not hungry and you will realise just how easy it is to do so.

3. Some people are overweight simply because they eat more than they burn off in physical activity.
   Poor lifestyle habits are common, with many of us having sedentary and desk-bound jobs. It may not be that you are overeating by much; just that you fail to burn what you are eating. This is often referred to as ‘creeping obesity’ and occurs most often among the middle-aged.
Here are some steps to help you begin thinking about the changes you can make to lose weight and feel good about yourself.

⭐ Readiness for change

Check your readiness for change by being your own ‘weight coach’.

- Write an action plan and stick to it. Build rewards into your program.
- Recruit others to help you by letting them know that you are attempting to lose weight so they are less likely to offer you food. They can also encourage you by joining in an exercise program.
- Create a ‘weight loss friendly’ environment. It is easier to resist temptation if it is not there to tempt you in the first place.
- Don’t eat your emotions. If you are happy, sad, anxious or angry, don’t go straight to the chocolate bar or biscuit tin. Try to recognise your non-hungry eating and substitute it with a different activity.
- If you want to celebrate a success, treat yourself to an activity that will make you feel good.
- Believe you can change. Having confidence in your ability to activate behavioural changes will make the difference. Research has shown that if you believe you can do something, you are more likely to succeed.

⭐ Food diary

A food diary helps you prepare for the change you need to take on. Keep a food diary for a week and examine how much you eat, the type of food you eat and when you tend to eat. By keeping a food diary you are taking the first step to change your eating habits. You will be able to gain control of the problem eating areas. This is known in psychological terms as a ‘behavioural approach’, as you search for the stimuli that set-off your unwanted eating and begin to learn to apply principles of self control.

⭐ Self-monitoring

Keep a record of your exercise output. Monitoring this increases motivation and provides insight into what promotes and restricts positive behaviour change. Once you see the patterns of overeating or little or no exercise, you will be able to work out alternative and more adaptive behaviours. It will also help you to understand any emotional patterns that are playing a part in holding you back for positive change.

⭐ Self-talk

What you say to yourself and how you motivate yourself plays a major part in the success of your weight loss attempts. Many people benefit from the help of a health professional like a psychologist who can assist in changing health behaviour. Quitting a weight loss program is common, so seeking help from a professional will help you set a goal, enhance your motivation and bolster your commitment to the change process.

⭐ Changing habits

Healthy eating and exercise is only part of losing weight. These behaviours need to become habits. You need to think about your relationship with food and your attitude towards exercise, and then change deeply entrenched habits, beliefs and behaviours.
Physical activity

Increasing daily physical activity can come from many small changes made throughout your day, as these small changes add up quickly. By increasing daily activity, you will quickly make this a positive health habit.

Self-reward

Work out a reward system that is tied to your food intake and physical activity. Rewards should be for changes in old unhelpful behaviours and for weight loss. Changing these unhealthy habits will make the difference in the long-term. You need to be your own ‘coach’, even when you have help from others. Ultimately it is up to you to search for solutions to eating and exercise problems.

Some practical ideas

Before reaching for food, ask yourself ‘am I really hungry?’

If you are eating and not enjoying it, ask yourself ‘do I need to finish this?’

Be mindful of all eating habits as this helps you to be more aware of making healthier food choices.

Try not focus on an endpoint like ‘I need to lose 15 kilos.’ This should not be your only measure of success.

Make eating the activity. So often we eat on the run. Eating should be an activity on its own, not something we do while we are doing something else.

Eat slowly and monitor your hunger/satiety scale. Stop eating when you are full. It takes about 20 minutes for your hormones to register that you are full, so eating quickly can lead to overeating.
Managing negative thoughts

Positive thinking plays a significant role in your weight loss efforts. Ongoing negative thoughts can lead to self-defeating behaviours that can make losing weight difficult. Criticising yourself every time you eat, focusing on the food you are limiting and approaching your exercise routine with dread are all negative thought patterns that can sabotage your efforts.

Our thoughts or interpretations of a particular situation matter most. If our interpretation is negative, pessimistic or unconstructive, it can sponsor feelings of stress, anxiety or angst.

A negative thought happens when your mind attacks any possibility of a positive outlook. It does this by focusing all your thoughts and energy on the negative aspect of a situation.

Whenever you feel a negative thought taking hold, try the following mindful thinking exercise.

1. These thoughts are harmful to me
   Remind yourself that a negative thought is harmful. It prevents you from feeling confident, empowered and positive. It has the power to turn you into the victim of your own situation, leaving you at the mercy of your circumstances.

2. I can choose different thoughts
   You have the ability to choose which thoughts to focus on and which to discard. It is difficult to stop the barrage of negative thoughts that enter your mind, especially when it seems as though it is out of your control. Always remember that you can choose which thoughts to hold onto and let go of. Become intolerant in allowing your unhelpful thoughts to stay in your mind.

3. How else can I interpret this?
   Answering this question can transform your thoughts immediately. In asking how else you could interpret a negative situation, your mind begins to seek alternative ways of viewing the situation. This causes your focus to change towards a new perspective, and in turn, your stress levels reduce, controlling the negative thought.

Remember you are the one in control of where you would like to focus your attention. By choosing supportive thoughts, you give yourself a better chance to make the most of something that could otherwise cause you stress.

Stay connected
- Read information from reputable internet sites that you then verify with your medical practitioner.
- Should you wish to find an accredited practising dietician in your area, visit the Dieticians Association of Australia website daa.asn.au
- There are a number of useful smartphone applications that can easily be downloaded to help you track your progress with both diet and exercise programs.
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