

Being Successful at Personal Change

Discussion with Dale Lugenbehl

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We will be more successful in our efforts to make wanted changes in our lives, if we understand how personal change works. This is particularly true when it comes to our efforts to move ourselves or others towards a plant-based diet.

A key factor in making change real in one's day to day life concerns whether one approaches change in a gradual and incremental way, or tries to make comprehensive and sweeping changes in one fell swoop. Our tendency is to think it will be easier to make one small change at a time and gradually change our food choices so they are more like what we envision. We will give up our present harmful choices, but we will "taper off." Although this sounds reasonable, in fact it is often *easier* to make sweeping changes in one's life.

Problems with Tapering Off

Gradually cutting back on something tends to create a feeling of deprivation. If I am used to eating an eight ounce steak, eating only a four ounce steak will leave me feeling unsatisfied and wanting more. It is often easier simply not to eat any meat at all.

Secondly, cutting back on something means I am still doing it, and this serves to maintain my taste for it. There is a tendency to think that what tastes good to us is fixed and unchangeable; however, this is not actually true. If I stop consuming certain products altogether, over time my taste will change and it will be much easier for me to stay with how I want to eat—the old foods simply no longer taste good to me and the new foods taste wonderful.

Thirdly, merely cutting back on something frequently does not change things *enough* for me to actually experience any *benefits* from having changed (though I do often notice what I have *given up* in changing). Dr. Dean Ornish reports that:

...patients in the comparison group of the Lifestyle Heart Trial made moderate changes in their diet [going to 30 percent of calories from fat, and 200 milligrams of cholesterol a day], yet they felt worse. The frequency of their chest pains increased by 165 percent. They did not lose weight. And their heart disease worsened. (Eat More, Weigh Less, 1993, pp. 56-58)

I may have cut my fat intake from 40% to 30% of calories, but I don't feel any better; in fact, I am actually continuing to get sicker. On the other hand, if I change to a completely plant-based diet, cut my fat consumption to 15% of calories and my cholesterol to zero, the changes in my body would be very apparent and provide me with real motivation to continue with the process of change. Dr. Ornish reports that

During the first week [after making deep and comprehensive changes in diet] patients... began to lose weight and reported more energy and a greater sense of well-being than they had experienced in years. They reported a 91 percent reduction in the average frequency of chest pains due to heart disease... (pp. 56-58)

It's very much like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day (40 cigarettes) and cutting back 10%--you would still be smoking 36 cigarettes. You gave up four cigarettes, but you would feel just as bad physically as you did before you cut back. Thus it would be very easy for you to conclude that what you were doing wasn't worth it. On the other hand, if you quit smoking entirely, you would almost immediately begin to experience dramatic improvements in how you feel and thus find motivation to continue with what you are doing.

Fourthly, sweeping changes disrupt our old routines and tend to break ingrained patterns of behavior.

Finally, cutting back on something means that I am still doing it and that means I am still making a public (nonverbal) statement to the world that I approve of the behavior in question. Stopping the old behavior completely is more noticeable to others and increases the chances of useful conversations arising in which others ask about what I am doing and perhaps support me in my efforts, and may even become inspired to make similar changes in their own lives.

Establishing a New Habit

Psychological research has consistently indicated that it only takes about 21 consecutive days to establish a new habit. Once established, the new and more life enhancing habit is no more difficult to have than the earlier more destructive habit. In fact, typically it is much easier.

Association with Others

Another insight that can help us successfully make and maintain changes is something the Buddha called *right association*. If I want to give up smoking or drinking, for example, it will be harder to succeed if I continue to associate with smokers and drinkers (particularly if they are ones who have no interest in quitting).

It will be much easier to be successful with change if we associate with people who already have successfully made the change we wish to make, or who are in the process of making a good faith effort to change now. If I want to eat a healthy plant-based diet, it will help to spend time with people who live this way now. ***Nothing teaches or inspires us to learn and change like an example*** (or role model) for several reasons.

Benefits of Example

An example shows me that living this way is *possible*. I can no longer maintain the fiction that "No one can do this" if I am in the presence of people who have done it and are continuing to do so.

Additionally, an example provides me with a constant illustration of *how* to live in the new way: what does shopping for food look like, how does one prepare vegan foods, etc.

Furthermore, a good example shows me the *benefits* to be derived from living this way: as a result of eating well, I can see that my new associates are strong, have good energy, appearance, calmness, and so on. Seeing the benefits from living differently is crucial. So many times our efforts to change are fear based. We try to frighten ourselves or others into behaving differently by pointing out the dire health or environmental consequences of maintaining our present behaviors. Fear is simply not inspiring; seeing the benefits of change truly is inspiring.

In conclusion, one of the biggest obstacles to successfully changing to a plant based diet is the belief that it simply is too big a change and is therefore not possible. Colin Campbell, in the *China Study*, replies that “no amount of talk will ever convince you to change your mind. *You have to try it.* Give it a month. You’ve been eating cheeseburgers your whole life; a month without them won’t kill you.” If we do this, Campbell says we will discover four things:

- 1) There are lots of great tasting foods we can eat,
- 2) We’ll probably find that it’s easier than we thought,
- 3) We’ll feel better, and most importantly
- 4) We will discover that it really is possible—not just for someone else, but for *us*.

Bringing about personal change is a *learned skill*. If we are thoughtful, our efforts *can* be successful and the process can actually be fun!

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