

Health Behavior Change: Taking Personal Responsibility

Most people have largely surrendered control of their health to professionals rather than taking personal responsibility by following a healthy lifestyle.

An important prerequisite to being an effective health evangelist to others is the ability to take personal responsibility for your own health. It's one thing to know all the right answers but another to do it. Being a living example of the principles you teach, and having experienced first-hand the struggles of taking control of your life and making the lifestyle changes that you knew you should will give you credibility and a compassionate heart for those who are still fighting the battle.

It takes time to change a habit because what you are doing is changing an established pathway in the brain to another one. For example, take the sensation of hunger between meals. Most people will get up, go to the kitchen, find something that tastes good, and eat it. Once you learn that it's better for your weight and your digestive system to not eat between meals you must replace that old automatic response with a new chosen response. You must override your automatic pilot! Your decision now is based on information, not feelings. You know if you have had an adequate meal that the sensation is probably the body needing more water rather than more food. So you drink a full glass of water and stay out of the kitchen, and the hunger sensation ceases.

The first few days are the hardest because the rut to the old behavior is far deeper than the new pathway you are trying to establish. But the longer you use the new pathway the deeper it will become, until that action becomes your automatic pilot. You may always be tempted with your old habit, but the frequency and strength will decrease over time.

To reinforce the fact that a change will be worth the effort, there is a study conducted by Dr. Lester Breslow and his team that shows that living health practices can result in longer life. They asked 7,000 residents of Alameda County in Northern California a variety of questions, such as whether they smoked, drank alcohol, exercised, were overweight, ate breakfast, slept seven or eight hours a night, and snacked between meals.

After following the group for nine years, the team learned that 38 percent of the men aged 60–69 who adopted no more than two of the health practices, had died. By comparison, of those who had adopted four or five practices, only 24 percent had died. For women, 38 percent who adopted no more than two had died, while only 9 percent of those who adopted four or five had died. This study shows that anyone—even after age 60—who adopts good health practices can decrease the risk of dying prematurely from such major diseases as heart disease, cancer, and stroke. (See Lisa F. Berkman and Lester Breslow, *Health and Ways of Living: The Alameda County Study*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.)

Based on this study, consider your own health habits. Chances are you don't smoke or drink alcohol, but what about other habits?

Do you get enough exercise?

Are you overweight?

Do you eat a wholesome breakfast?

Do you get at least 7 or 8 hours of sleep?

Do you snack between meals?

Do you drink enough water?

Do you eat too much fat or sugar?

Do you control negative thinking?

Is your life as balanced as it should be?

Most of us are something like the patient who, being lectured by his physician about his

It is Impossible to “Break” Bad Habits

Most people talk about “breaking” bad habits. But to be exact, habits are really never broken, only changed. The habit pathways in your brain are like ruts in a road that will always be there. That’s why unless you have a plan and work it, it’s easy to fall back into unhealthy ways. Since you can’t “break” old habits, your focus must be on retraining your brain to use new pathways. These new habits must be repeated again and again to establish the rut! That’s why it’s so important to stick with your resolve for 21 days. After that time, as you are beginning to make new pathways in your brain, it should be easier.

Here are positive statements you may want to copy and say to yourself as you retrain your thinking.

- I am breaking bad habits.
- I am no longer doing things that go along with the unhealthful habit.
- I am turning my mind to positive thoughts.
- I am developing a supportive environment.
- I have set a date for making the break—and I am going to do it.
- I am successfully working my lifestyle change plan.
- I may not make big changes at once, but I will change.
- I have set a tiny goal in the direction I want to go.
- Each time I reach success, I reward myself.
- Each week, I will take one more tiny step toward my goal.
- I won’t punish myself for failure.

—Jan W. Kuzma, *The Live-Longer Lifestyle*

need for better health habits, complained: “I didn’t come here to be told that I’m burning the candle at both ends. I knew that already. What I came for was more wax!”

Health information in and of itself does not help us much unless we choose to make use of it. Our problem is that, until we become sick, we find our present habits and life style so comfortable that we resist change. It isn’t that we

lack interest in the subject of health. This topic fascinates most Americans nowadays. Bookstores and magazine racks are flooded with up-to-the-minute health information. But, until we perceive a practical application to our immediate needs, most of us are happy to be up to date without bothering to apply what we know. Our real need is for a powerful motivation that will make us want to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

At rare moments we seem to be able to look beyond the horizons of our present way of life. When we do, we catch a breath-taking view of the wide band of potentialities available to us. Often this happens when we see someone we know making a drastic improvement in lifestyle. If flabby old George can look and feel ten years younger, then we can too. We can wake up in the morning feeling full of vigor and vim, knowing that this day is going to be the best of our lives. How? That is what the rest of this chapter is about. When you understand the psychology of health behavior change, you will be better able to make the continuing lifestyle changes to improve your own health, while at the same time being a more effective health evangelist to others.

How to Turn Information into Reformation

Sometimes the most intelligent people act foolishly. Knowledge at times even gets in the way of wisdom, as when the scientifically oriented reject faith in God because they cannot empirically establish His existence in the laboratory. The wisest man who ever lived testified that true wisdom begins with “the fear of the Lord (Prov. 9:10).”

In this setting *fear* means respect for. Those who respect both themselves as children of God and the Creator’s laws that are designed to provide maximum life and health, not only experience better health, but also soon learn that doing so promotes real happiness. People cannot be separated into little compartments called “physical,” “mental,” “social,” “emotional,” and “spiritual.” One of the greatest health discoveries of recent years is that the mind can contribute more to the state of illness than microbes can. The five components of our being that are listed above are so interrelated that what affects one affects all.

Writing in the February, 1977, issue of *Psychology Today*, Kenneth Pelletier gives this key to the mounting health problem he terms “afflictions of civilization.” From the standpoint of the whole person, it becomes clear, he tells us, “that a person’s mind and body work as a single unit and that health exists when they are in harmony.” He concludes that “staying healthy involves much more than simply seeing a doctor when we become ill. How we live—including what we eat, our family life, our working day, and many other large and small details of our routine—is critically important in keeping us healthy.”

Because most of the major diseases we now face are rooted in causes involving everyday living, they cannot be contained or controlled neatly in hospitals or laboratories. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that death rates from chronic diseases have risen dramatically over the last 50 years in spite of the tremendous advances being made in the field of acute care. Our high-technology, acute-care system is not designed to deal efficiently with lifestyles, nutrition, health behavior, lack of exercise, and the stress and tension that are recognized as being among the major causes of chronic disease.

The 1979 Surgeon General’s report entitled *Healthy People* states: “The health of the Nation’s citizens can be significantly improved through actions individuals can take themselves. . . . For the individual often only modest lifestyle changes are needed to substantially reduce risk for several diseases. And many of the personal decisions required to reduce risk for one disease can reduce it for others. Within the practical grasp of most Americans are simple measures to enhance the prospects of good health, including:

- elimination of cigarette smoking;
- reduction of alcohol misuse;
- moderate dietary changes to reduce intake of excess calories, fat, salt and sugar;
- moderate exercise;
- periodic screening (at intervals determined by age and sex) for major disorders such as high blood pressure and certain cancers; and
- adherence to speed laws and use of seat belts.

Widespread adoption of these practices could go far to improve the health of our citizens.”—Page 10.

Later in the report the Surgeon General states: “Beginning in early childhood and throughout life, each of us makes decisions affecting our health. They are made, for the most part, without regard to, or contact with, the health system. Yet their cumulative impact has a greater effect on the length and quality of life than all the efforts of medical care combined.”—Page 119.

The report adds: “Consider, too, the strikingly lower cancer rates among certain groups of Americans compared to those for the general population. Seventh-day Adventists neither smoke nor drink, and about half follow a milk, egg, and vegetable diet. For this group, not only is their cancer incidence, for those cancers strongly related to smoking and drinking, less than one seventh that of the general population; even their cancer incidence at other sites is only half to three-fourths as high.”—Page 119.

The Motivating Power of Religion

Why do people with strong religious convictions often have better health? The one ingredient essential to success in any resolve we make to improve our health habits is motivation. The woman whose husband promised her a fur coat if she would stop smoking naturally lost most of her motivation not to smoke after she got the coat.

A fascinating study conducted with those who were attempting to stop smoking demonstrated that religion was one of the most powerful motivating factors in permanently quitting smoking. It was found that those who have strong religious motivation for stopping are more likely to do so and to never smoke again than are those who do not have this kind of motivation (Waingrow, S. M. Report from National Clearinghouse on Smoking and Health, USPHS. O. W. Elsinger, “Psychological Predictors of Smoking Recidivism,” *Journal of Social Behavior*, Dec., 1971).

Sam gave up both smoking and drinking at the same time. It was the most difficult struggle

he had ever been through. He discovered that it took all the help he could find. Fortunately his

Principles for Overcoming

We cannot overcome on our own. Our adversary is too strong for us. But he is a defeated foe. We must realistically face up to our weaknesses, but at the same time remember that Jesus has gained the victory for us if we will let Him win the battle for us. Some ways we cooperate are:

1. Avoid places and situations that you know are likely to tempt you. Run, don't walk, away from temptation.
2. Overcome evil habits by replacing them with good habits. Particularly concentrate on developing the best health habits you can.
3. Hide God's word in your memory to help recognize His will in every situation. Carry Bible promise cards with you to refer to when tempted to fall back.
4. Develop such a great love for Christ that you would rather die than disappoint Him. When tempted, concentrate on what Jesus would do rather than on the temptation.
5. Be constantly in an attitude of prayer and communion with God.
6. Attend group therapy sessions, helping others gain the victories you are gaining. Pray for the members of your group at a specific time each day. If a church member, attend Sabbath School, church services, and prayer meetings faithfully.
7. If you do not yet belong to one, organize a prayer and study group with five or six friends who live in your area.
8. Do not neglect Bible study. Spend some time each day contemplating the life of Jesus.

When Satan comes to dispute your position, call on the Lord to rebuke him, When he is tempting and bargaining with you, appeal to God's Holy Word. "It is written." And when he uses another individual to tempt or attack you, trust in Christ to rebuke that person and to defend you.

—Leo Van Dolson

family and friends supported him. But that was not enough. When everything else failed him he turned to God in a desperate bid for divine help and found the help he needed. Sam gave his life to God and developed a new and powerful motivation for not smoking or drinking, as well as receiving help in keeping his cravings from overpowering him. The unaided human will often be powerless to overcome the temptations that destroy health of body and mind. That is where trust in divine power can be most effective.

Notice this wonderful promise that the Bible holds out to those who find temptation assailing them: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

People who have acquired spiritual values do have an advantage. They accept as the motivating power for all that they do a sense of strong commitment to God and His way and will in their lives. This includes a sense of responsibility to keep their bodies in as healthy a condition as possible in order to be able to serve God better and be a blessing to those about them.

Use Positive Motivators

Too often in our approach to sharing we leave the impression that what we're suggesting is BITTER rather than BETTER. And then we wonder why people shy away from it. Too often we stress the negative rather than the positive. We act as though we know what is best and others better listen to what we have to say if they want to know what's for their own best good. Sometimes, in fact, we're so intent on getting our particular message across that we aren't even aware of what the problem is that's causing others to continue doing that which isn't good for them.

Take for example a teacher who catches a 7th-grader smoking. The ensuing dialogue might run something like this:

"Oh, you shouldn't do that!"

"Why not?"

“Why, because it’s bad for you. You’ll get heart disease, lung cancer and emphysema.”

Then what if the teacher went to the principal to get help in arranging for a series of films to be shown to the 7th grade. Films, naturally, on heart disease, lung cancer and emphysema!

Would that take care of the problem? Probably not. It would be much better if the teacher would try to find out why the child had taken up smoking and deal with the basic cause. Usually one of two reasons will come out. Either he’ll say, “I want to be like Dad and Mom” or “the fellows will call me ‘chicken’ if I don’t.”

What is needed? Obviously not a lecture on heart disease, lung cancer and emphysema. The children who are having this very real problem need to know how to be like Mom and Dad without ruining their lungs; or what to do when someone calls them “chicken.”

Actually, the key to the right approach in bringing about health behavior change was written many years ago. It is found in the health classic, *The Ministry of Healing*. “It is of little use to try to reform others by attacking what we may regard as wrong habits. Such effort often results in more harm than good. In His talk with the Samaritan woman, instead of disparaging Jacob’s well, Christ presented something better. ‘If thou knewest the gift of God,’ He said, ‘and who it is that saith to thee, Give Me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of Him, and He would have given thee living water.’ He turned the conversation to the treasure He had to bestow, offering the woman something better than she possessed, even living water, the joy and hope of the gospel. This is the illustration of the way in which we are to work. We must offer men something better than that which they possess, even the peace of Christ which passeth all understanding. We must tell them of God’s holy law, the transcript of His character, and an expression of that which He wishes them to become” (pp. 156, 157).

Note the statement that “it is of little use” to attack the wrong habits of others. Why is this so? Because those involved become defensive about their pet habits and tune out those trying to help them. What then is the most effective way of

bringing about a change in a person’s lifestyle? In a pleasant, optimistic, affirmative, and positive way we must demonstrate that there is something better. That makes good sense, doesn’t it? Many will move in the right direction once they truly understand the benefits to be realized.

We need to approach suggested behavior change, whether it be stopping smoking or just learning to drink five to six glasses of water each day, as a joyful, happy thing to do—something that will help us experience the “more abundant life” Christ offers in John 10:10.

The Desire of Ages enlarges on Jesus teaching “something better” this way: “In the sermon on the mount, [Jesus] sought to undo the work that had been wrought by false education, and to give His hearers a right conception of His kingdom and of His own character. Yet He did not make a direct attack on the errors of the people. He saw the misery of the world on account of sin, yet He did not present before them a vivid delineation of their wretchedness. He taught them of something infinitely better than they had known. Without combating their ideas of the kingdom of God, He told them the conditions of entrance therein, leaving them to draw their own conclusions as to its nature. The truths He taught are no less important to us than to the multitude that followed Him” (p. 299).

Did you catch what was said above? Not just “something better” but “SOMETHING INFINITELY BETTER.” That’s what God wants to offer people through us once we have found it for ourselves.

Everybody Fails at Something

The desire for change is followed by developing a plan of action. There are hundreds of programs offered by a variety of institutions and organizations which promise quick, sure fire results to help people change their health behavior. But old habits and old ways of doing things die hard. Often short term behavior change success is followed by long term failure. Something comes up or some unexpected stress at home or work causes people who have changed destructive habits for a while to slip back into the old

ways. This is followed by a sense of frustration, guilt, and a loss of self-esteem.

Some who succeed in breaking a harmful habit end up substituting a new destructive habit for the old one. Some who are successful in quitting smoking begin to gratify their oral desires with food instead of cigarettes. The resulting obesity does not carry the risk of lung cancer but may increase the risk of heart disease. Not all change means success.

Although everyone can change some bad habits, everyone has harmful habits they cannot change. Some resign themselves to being stuck with this habit for the rest of their lives. Others keep trying to change, but never achieve more than limited or short-term success. But their is another way out of the human dilemma. Change is possible.

God Gives Success

Every desire to do right or to do better has been planted in the human mind by God. God wants to give you success in overcoming harmful habits, and He can and will if we will cooperate with Him in the way He has outlined in the following AAA plan:

1. ADMIT. *First, we must admit that we cannot change by ourselves.* We may have tried many times only to learn that it is impossible to make the needed change through the exercise of our own will.

2. ASK. *Second, we must ask God specifically to help us.* This request does not always have to be made on bended knee or in church. But some way you must acknowledge your inability to change yourself and turn to the God who alone can give you the victory. You can even ask Him to make you willing to be willing. After having done so you still may be uncertain and not feel any different, but you have started the process God outlines and can claim His promised intervention in your life.

3. ACT. *Third, we must do something about it.* Faith is demonstrated in action. If the problem is smoking, throw away the cigarettes and ashtrays. Have the house fumigated. If overweight is the problem, start exercising and substitute a low-calorie, low cholesterol diet. Plan specific strategies for meeting overwhelming urges. Avoid circumstances that trigger strong desires to return to harmful habits. Keep praying as you recognize that it is God who is giving you success. The old behavioral modification techniques you tried before that didn't seem to work can work now with God's special help. Your efforts will be rewarded with success where before there was only failure. Be sure you give the credit to God.

God will not allow you to fail. Once you

“After we have done all we can for ourselves, making the best use of the advantages within our reach, then we may look to God with earnest prayer to do by His Spirit that which we cannot do for ourselves.”

—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 91

have done all **you can** God will do all **you can't**. All you do is never enough but what you do is necessary. God will supply what you lack and will bring success. Of course, you are

free to resume your old habits at any time. But when you do it is not a failure on God's part. It takes a conscious choice to give up God's help. Nevertheless, God's help is still there. You may lose a battle, but you don't have to lose the war.

“After we have done all we can for ourselves, making the best use of the advantages within our reach, then we may look to God with earnest prayer to do by His Spirit that which we cannot do for ourselves.”—*Gospel Workers*, p. 91.

Some think that once a habit has been turned over to God the old habit never threatens to return. Unfortunately this is not true. One obese lady who had lost 40 pounds observed that the struggle was a continuous one. She acknowledged that unless she talked with God about breakfast she would overeat at breakfast. Unless she talked with God throughout the morning she was likely to graze all morning long. Without a commitment of her obesity problem to God at

each meal and throughout the day she would meet with failure. God promises long term success only to those who maintain a long term relationship with Him.

God does not want us to be satisfied with overcoming just one problem in life. Once a habit has been broken and a new behavior acquired, it's time to move on to a new victory—to a new lifestyle increasingly productive of good health. What surprises many is that when they gain victory by God's help over a harmful health habit they find their mental and spiritual health improves too. Our lives become a string of successes instead of a string of failures.

What About Disease and Disability?

Many who live with a bad lifestyle already have developed disease or disability. What happens when they begin a new lifestyle? If a person has developed emphysema as a result of long-term smoking that degree of emphysema will not change when they discard cigarettes, but neither will the disease progress. But the risk of heart disease and cancer will be drastically reduced almost immediately. God does not necessarily deliver us from the results of an unhealthy lifestyle, but He does offer us forgiveness, freedom from guilt, and the satisfaction and well-being that come from finding a new relationship with Him and living the more abundant life.

The Christian's Advantage

Because they largely are caused by harmful lifestyle today's health problems are more difficult to cope with than the epidemics of the past. Health educators need to be more aware than most have been that one of the most useful and effective instruments of health behavior change is found in religion—not only as a strong motivation factor, but also in the commitment to keep well through the recognition that our bodies need to be recognized as the temple of God.

The Christian also has the advantage of resources not available to those who attempt behavioral change without God's help. Christians can depend on the power of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, the support of the organized church, the power of intercessory prayer, and the wealth of promises and information found in the Bible. Not only does the Bible present special keys to health behavior change, but it also presents case history after case history of those who found victory over a variety of temptations and harmful habits. Here is the best source to find our God-given potential and power to live healthier, happier, holier lives.

Ten Steps to Changing Your Lifestyle

1. Prepare. Educate yourself. Read all you can on why you should change, how to avoid relapse, and the benefits you'll experience.

2. Decide what you want to change. Work on one lifestyle change at a time.

3. Make a plan, and determine a start date.

If you want to lose weight, your plan might include:

- Take half size portions
- Chew each bite 20 times
- Only eat when you are sitting at the table
- Stay out of the kitchen unless preparing meals
- Buy only healthy food
- Omit desserts, or omit weekday desserts
- Drink water every time you feel hungry, unless it's mealtime.

4. Tell someone about your plan, so you become accountable to them. Get support from your family and friends. Join a support group.

5. Anticipate potential stumbling blocks. Visualize resourceful ways to overcome. For example, if you're tempted at coffee breaks to eat donuts, keep an apple with you and eat that instead.

6. Give yourself permission to fail and forgive yourself when you do. Don't give up because you occasionally fail. Don't let derailments be permanent. Get back on your program as soon as possible (certainly within 24 hours). The only area where it's important not to regress is when you're dealing with addictions. Whether it's food, cigarettes, alcohol or caffeine drinks, relapse to former addictions can cause binge behavior that makes it more difficult to get back on the wagon again.

7. Set small weekly goals you can likely achieve. Make a chart, so you can monitor your progress. Remind yourself every day (and say aloud) "Inch by inch everything's a cinch."

8. Reward yourself for your achievements. Enjoy your success, no matter how small it may seem. Say to yourself, "This is progress." Now do something really kind for yourself. Do something you enjoy, such as going to see a concert or taking a bubble bath.

9. Continue motivating yourself. Post notes around the house, the office, and inside your car to remind you of your goals and progress. Listen to motivational tapes.

10. Claim your ultimate Resource. As a Christian, you have an additional resource—an important one—God's willingness to help you achieve success. "I can do all things through him [Jesus Christ] who gives me strength," wrote the apostle Paul (Phil. 41:13 NIV). You may want to choose a number of "power" verses from the Bible and keep them accessible to read or repeat when you're facing a temptation. Such verses can be an important tool on your road to a successful lifestyle change.

When you're tempted to quit your exercise program, for example, remember the promise, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength..." (1 Cor. 10:13 NRSV)

When you push your cart past the candy bars at the supermarket, repeat, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31 NIV)

When your car keeps trying to pull into Dunkin' Donuts, keep your foot on the accelerator and say, "Yea, though I walk (drive) through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me..." (Psalms 23:4)

(Adapted from *The Live-Longer Lifestyle*, by Jan W. Kuzma.)