Unlocking Behavior Change

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According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), 86% of the nation's $2.7 trillion annual healthcare expenditures go to treat people with chronic and mental conditions,[2] and that most chronic diseases are caused by consumer behaviors.[2] If someone could unlock the secrets to sustained behavior change, we could radically improve our population health.

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of U.S. annual healthcare spend goes to treatment for chronic and mental conditions.

SOURCE: CDC, 2018.

Everyone from the government to "big pharma" and major health plans has attempted to tap into the power of behavior change, with mixed results. Fewer than one in five adults (16%) report being very successful at making health-related improvements, such as losing weight (20%), starting a regular exercise program (15%), following a healthier diet (10%), and reducing stress (7%).[3]

Why is it so hard to change unhealthy behaviors?

A 2016 study published in the Public Health journal suggests common errors that prevent the successful implementation of health-related behavior change.[4]

→ **Assuming human behavior is "just common sense"** and that it requires no serious thought. Just because something seems obvious ("just eat less") does not take into account that change is difficult and requires sustained motivation and support.

→ **Assuming that messaging/awareness is the primary mechanism driving behavior change.** "If only we could get the message out there in a way that people could understand and identify with, then they will change." Again, this oversimplifies the complex nature of long-term behavior change.

→ **Assuming people act rationally.** It's a misconception that after being presented with evidence, people will do what they know to be sensible and logical. Even though most smokers want to quit, and dieters want to eat less, behaviors like smoking and overeating are often embedded into their lives, and ingrained into their routines and habits. When faced with temptation and social pressure ("Come on, I don't want to smoke alone"), rational thought often goes out the window.

We do know that behavior change rarely happens overnight, especially when it comes to achieving longer-term goals, such as losing weight or lowering blood glucose. Willpower, which the American Psychological Association (APA) defines as "the ability to resist short-term gratification in pursuit of long-term goals or objectives[3]," is only one factor influencing behavior change.

Willpower is not a fixed trait, and it can be strengthened or depleted. Factors such as positive beliefs and attitudes can mitigate the effects of willpower depletion. With the right motivation, the APA claims, people may be able to persevere even when their willpower has run out.[5]

associated with successful behavior change

One of the most widely-cited and used theories, the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change,[6] suggests that people move through change in six stages: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and termination. Based on this model, a number of strategies associated with behavior change have been identified:[7]

1 /Take ownership & accountability.

To begin the process, people need to understand why they need to change, acknowledge that they want to change, and internalize the idea that the healthy behavior is part of who they want to be. Studies have shown that patients who took responsibility for their own health were more likely to succeed in changing their behavior.[8]

Realizing 2 /change is possible.

They may not be able to change everything overnight, but people can start to work toward small, incremental, SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Oriented).[4] "Lose weight," is not a SMART goal, but a plan that incorporates goals like "walk for 30 minutes 5 days this week" can contribute to a weight loss goal while allowing them to track their progress. If they don't know where to begin, people can seek out a doctor or health coach and together create SMART goals they believe they can meet.

3 /Finding supportive relationships.

Whether it be family or friends providing encouragement to loved ones or like-minded people trying to accomplish similar health goals, behavior change is more likely to stick when it's connected to social relationships. And online support communities can connect these social relationships and help bolster behavior change. A 2016 study of a behavior-based weight-loss program found that active participants in online community platforms followed instructions more precisely, had a more positive perception of achieving their goals, and reported receiving more social support than those who did not actively participate.[10]

4 / Rewarding & reinforcing.

Create opportunities to incentivize healthy behaviors and reduce the rewards that come from negative behaviors or inaction.[6]

5 / Continuing reminders & cues.

People need a steady stream of mental cues that support and encourage healthy behavior. This can help reduce the impact of willpower depletion and keep the person from relapsing into unhealthy habits.[7,8]

A more recent model that also considers consumer-facing health technologies is McKinsey's "new paradigm for patient behavior," which offers similar elements of successful behavior change:[11]

→ Engaging individuals more effectively by taking advantage of new insights from behavioral psychology and behavioral economics

→ Integrating behavior change as a core component of new care delivery models

→ Using the power of influencers and networks to support behavior change

→ Utilizing remote and self-care technologies to support, empower, and connect individuals to clinicians and other health influencers
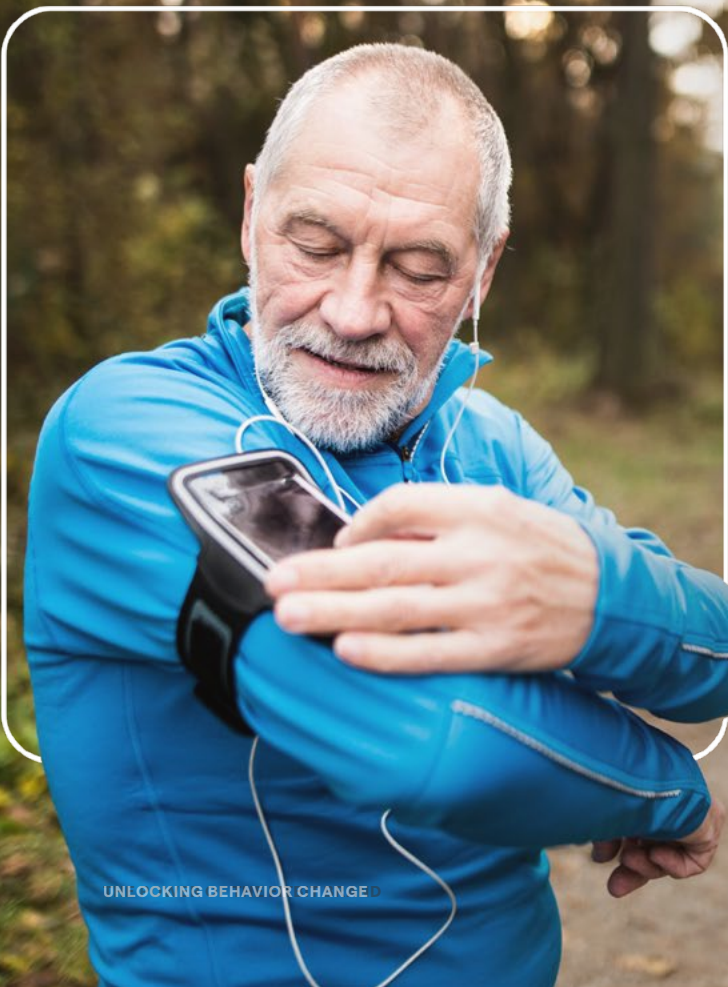
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