

## **Obstacle or Opportunity: Overcoming Six Challenges to Change**

By Cindy Loughran

Why is change so hard? We say we want to change a particular behavior. We know we will benefit from the change. Yet, we continue to do what we've always done and we continue to get the same results we've always gotten. And, the longer we do it, the more frustrated and disappointed in ourselves we get. We beat ourselves up for being weak or lazy. We get sucked into the vortex of a downward spiral!

Even the most successful among us have trouble breaking behavior patterns and habits. A man who can run a marathon in under four hours can't manage his time effectively at work. A woman who runs her own successful business can't stop losing her temper with her kids. Clearly, they don't lack discipline or willpower. They've proven their ability to make changes in many aspects of their lives. As, probably, have you.

Let's look at 6 of the greatest obstacles to making personal change and some ways to overcome them.

1. Being right. As human beings, we like to be right, even if it about being wrong. If we aren't sure we are going to be successful doing something, we set ourselves up to be able to say, "See, I knew I couldn't do it." As Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." Your own beliefs about your likelihood of success and the messages you send yourself can be your best motivator or your worst obstacle. Positive self-talk helps you live into a successful reality. Practice affirmations, pay attention to and focus on your successes rather than your set backs. Find things to be right about that move you closer to your goal.

2. Physiological factors. When we do something often enough, it becomes a habit. By definition, a habit is a pattern of behaviors performed repeatedly until it becomes, automatic and unconscious. In the course of developing that habit, we actually create a rut in our hippocampus, the part of the brain that is responsible for, among other things, memory. Once we're 'in the groove', it is hard to steer ourselves out of it. In fact, we can't. Once there, that path will always be there, so we need to create a fresh new path and repeat the new, more desirable behavior over and over in order to make it a new habit. Over time, the old path will become overgrown and impassible, much as a path in the forest becomes overgrown after years of dis-use. Determine what the new path will be. and work toward that rather than resisting the old.

3. Opposing forces. For every reason we want to make a change, there is a reason why we don't. If these opposing forces are of equal strength, or we perceive that the benefits of keeping things the same are stronger than the value of changing, we get stuck. For example, let's say you want to lose weight. If the positive value of shedding pounds and becoming healthier carries the same intensity as the negative value of having to sacrifice the foods you enjoy in the process, you're stuck. If delegating tasks around the house loses the battle to needing everything to be done your way, you're stuck! In order to move off dead center and change your behavior, you'll have to find a reason or payoff for the change that is more compelling than sticking with the status quo.

4. Trying to do it alone. Research has shown that people are much more likely to be successful making changes when they have supportive relationships. We all need others to help us through the many phases of change. We need others to help us clarify the changes we want to make, provide information and resources, hold us accountable, be a buddy by working toward making the same or similar change along side us or encourage us when the going gets tough. These people may be friends, professional coaches, **family** members, experts, teachers, mentors, formal support groups, etc. The support may be face-to-face, virtual, via phone, web, it doesn't matter. Do whatever works for you. Just don't do it alone!

5. Overwhelm. Often, we try to take on too many changes at once or we have only a vague idea of what we want to change. When this is the case, we get confused and overwhelmed and we give up, often doing more of what we were trying to stop doing. In order to avoid overwhelm, prioritize the changes you want to make and take on one or two at a time. Create small milestones along the way so you can assess your progress and celebrate even the tiniest wins.

6. Identity. We often know ourselves as a combination of our behaviors. Our identity and our routines are often tied to our **habits**. People trying to stop drinking have their drinking buddies and routines. Overweight people are members of a crowd who go out to dinner together. Procrastinators have folks they chat with at work as a way of putting off doing work. Busy people see themselves as the only one who can get anything done or done right So, if we make a change, we might be left to ask, who am I? How will the change affect my relationships and my routine? In order to overcome this identity crisis, remember, you are not your behaviors. You are much more than that: your values, your beliefs, your goals and aspirations. Find people who share those deeper parts of yourself. Develop strategies for handling situations that put you at a high risk of going back to your old **habits**. Change your routine. Instead of going out to dinner with your old friends, suggest going for a walk or to the movies. Excuse yourself from conversations that distract you getting things done. Identify with a new set of behaviors and people and activities that support them.

We face many challenges when we take on change. We can see them as obstacles or opportunities. One will keep us where we are, the other will catapult us forward toward a happier, healthier more satisfying life. Believe you can do it and know you are worth it.