

Habits, Satiety, and Meditation

I left off talking about how there's not a lot of activity going on in the brain when we're acting out of habit. While we're *learning* a behavior there's a whole lot going on in our neural pathways as we learn it. But once the new behavior is stored as a chunk of actions ... or a habit ... there's not a lot going on any more while we do it. Seems safe to say that to make a habit, we have to do a thing until we don't think about it any more. Makes sense that to un-make a habit, we'd have to think about that thing until we *didn't* do it any more. What's the old saying? Easier said, than done? Even Mark Twain observed, "Habit is habit, and not to be flung out the window by any man, but coaxed down the stairs one step at a time." And we don't want to undo all habits, because not having to think about a certain behavior leaves the brain free to do other things. It's critical in dispatch that you can go through a number of steps in your process that way, while having your brain working on other pieces of the puzzle that aren't part of the routine. I'd say unmaking something *you* decide is a bad habit is what we're actually talking about here.

And this is where mindfulness comes in. I imagine eyes rolling at this one. Yes, the term mindfulness has become a buzzword for everyone from Oprah to Ellen and every pop culture guru in between. But it's an old idea, as old as the ancient practice of yoga, first codified in writing around the year 500. Simply put, it means being actively aware of what you're doing, as you're doing it.

One of the things I try to be mindful about is stress eating. When I was working in television I used to joke that you could tell what kind of news day it was by how many of us were standing in front of the vending machine with a hankering for our favorite snack food. I was there often enough myself and wasn't above throwing an elbow if there was only one Hershey bar left in the machine. How do you get over that? Well, honestly, sometimes you don't. Sometimes you just eat the chocolate. Does that mean it's all doom and gloom? Of course not. You can make a choice that results in eating less chocolate and still being satisfied. Eating dark chocolate satisfies your brain more than milk chocolate does and there's a study on satiety out there that shows it. You can read that study here: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3302125/>. It's a small step, but it's worth repeating that small steps can satisfy your needs *and* help build toward sustainable change.

And there are other small steps to try, if you're thinking in that direction.

I'm going to start with food because, if you hadn't already guessed, it's a big area of interest for me. I'll start with the example in the article on habits in the June 2014 issue of Scientific American. If you have a dish with candy within arm's length, and you reach for a treat without giving it a thought, you could try moving it further away or out of sight. A habit can be stimulated by a visual cue, this one by the dish hanging out there on the desk. Or, if you take the same path to the vending machine every day, try a different route. While you're headed there, you have a chance to think about what you're doing. I actually have consciously thought, "OK, I'm turning the corner to the kitchen, I have change in my hand, and now I'm standing in front of the vending machine. Turn around and walk away from the vending machine. Breathe. Walk away." And more than once I said "Walk away" out loud. Hey, no one said mindfulness was going to make you look sane to your colleagues.

Then the question. What to do with the stress that might have been alleviated by an influx of carbs and the corresponding output of serotonin? Along with breathing ...lots of breathing... one of my favorite resources is a book called, "Fifty Ways to Soothe Yourself Without Food," by Susan Albers, PsyD. And no, you're not really going to cocoon yourself in your favorite fleecy blankie in your dispatch center...or maybe you will, alone on an overnight shift...but there are plenty of tips offered to help get through the stress-trigger- then-eat-for-relief cycle that can feel as unformed as, "argh/eat/ahhh."

Another approach is ... and I'm getting ready for some grimacing here ... meditation. I'm not talking about endless amounts of time in full lotus position chanting "OM" or some other mantra. The best news I have to share is ... when it comes to sleep deprivation ... neither are some of the current studies out there.

In a University of Kentucky study, even those test subjects new to meditation did better on a psychomotor vigilance task test after 40 minutes of meditation when deprived of sleep than they did after a 40 minute nap. Psychomotor vigilance task tests are designed to test a subject's speed in response to visual stimulus ... often a simple button-pushing test. And while 40 minutes may seem a lot for folks who measure their speed in how quickly they can sprint to the bathroom and back, fMRI

studies of the brain show that 10-15 minutes of closed eyes meditation of any kind can help re-set brainwave patterns to the restful patterns found just before you go to sleep. Even 5 minutes may be useful enough to consider working it into a work day. Again, *small steps*.

You can read the UKentucky study here: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2919439/> and a "Psychology Today" blog entry that's a little less dense and has some helpful ideas, here: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/focus-forgiveness/201112/sleep-cycles-and-rebooting-your-brain-meditation>.

You may have heard of a program called, "21 Day Fix." I think it's based on the notion that it takes 21 days to make a habit, and 21 days to break a habit. Try making a new habit! Meditate five minutes a day, for 21 days and see what happens. Use it as a tool to refresh on a shift where you're fighting sleep disruption. Try a couple of deep breaths, and counting to ten, before reaching for the junk food. Probably easier to build a new habit than break an old one but we're a resilient and resourceful bunch in the dispatch community, right? Give it a go! And remember, at first, making small changes will help you build to a point where you can sustain some larger ones.

Up next: Let's talk about those 10,000 steps, shall we?