

AUTOMATING POWERFUL HABITS

Copyright © 2014 by Lynn Johnson, Ph.D. You may share this handout if contact information is attached.
Questions? Contact: DrJ@DrLynnJohnson.com

The problem of creating positive habits haunts all of us. How often have you thought how great it would be to work out every morning, read a new book every week, or spend more time with friends or family? Those habits would enhance our lives.

Your intentions are good – so are mine – but we don't seem to get going. We forget to do the new habit. Other things come up, competing for your attention and energy. Suddenly weeks have gone by and your hoped for good habit remains a theoretical possibility. It is the end of February and you still haven't started on those good, well-thought out resolutions.

Professor Peter Gollwitzer (at New York University) has investigated ways to improve our goal achievement. He investigated a simple but powerful tool, the "if-then" statement.

There are two easy components to this. First, identify all the barriers to your new goal. What would interfere? What would distract you? What competing desires might draw you away?

Second, write an intentional statement for each barrier. Write it in the form of "When X, then I do Y" or "If X occurs, I do Y." For example, I want to get into better physical condition. But I also travel all over, giving talks, workshops, and retreats. So my life can be hectic. My if-then statement? "If it is time for dinner and I haven't exercised that day, I do intensive exercises for 7 – 10 minutes before I go to dinner." That works surprisingly well. And it actually feels semi-automatic.

An abundance of solid research supports this. Women were offered a weight loss program. All of them wrote their goals and imagined how good it would be to achieve their new weight goal. Half of them then wrote "if-then" statements about possible problems that might come up. The other half just wrote positive statements about their goals.

Women writing the "if-then" statements more than doubled the weight lost in the program, compared with the women who simply wrote their goal. It is true that everyone did lose weight. But wouldn't twice as much success sound mouth-watering?

Eleventh grade students were offered an SAT study guide during the Christmas break. All set goals for how many problems they would work to prepare for the actual SAT test. Half also wrote "if-then" statements to reinforce their goals. They studied three times the number of items.

Gollwitzer finds that the new behavior shifts from will power to a kind of automatic enactment. That is, we rehearse the new habit with the if-then sentence, and when we are in that situation, the good new behavior comes somewhat automatically. Very little will power is required!

Try it yourself. Set a goal, write about why it would be a great goal to achieve. If you studied the Mental Contrasting video, add the contrast with your present day. Now write "if-then" statements to address each and every barrier you can think of. Track your results. And, for goodness sake, do not take my word for it. If you are a counselor or therapist, don't give this to your clients unless you try it yourself. That's only fair, wouldn't you say?