Creating Sustainable Change

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**Temporary and sustainable change**

Temporary change is done by making a single choice. It requires only having an choice I can make which is externally real and for which I have enough energy/effort to be able to achieve it. This change can be maintained as long as the effort can be maintained. Once the effort is stopped, the change will end. Because it is a drain on my energy (will power) psychologically, if the effort is large it will deplete my store of energy until it can no longer be maintained as a choice.

Also, the choice must be realistic for my current situation, not in general. If I want to lose weight, a realistic final goal might be a loss of 50 pounds, but that is not a realistic immediate goal – I cannot lose 50 pounds immediately. My realistic goal might be at most 4-5 pounds in two days if I exercise and eat nothing. More than that is currently not possible.

Sustainable change requires that I create a new internal balance point – that I reset my “normal,” the point I am now when I am psychologically exerting no effort. Ideally the new change will become what I do effortlessly (psychologically) or require me to exert a minimal amount of effort to sustain, an amount that will not deplete my energy over time. Sustainable change also requires that my actual external reality effort also be sustainable – just because something feels effortless psychologically (in my inner reality) does not mean that it takes no external-reality effort to do. For sustainable change I need to ensure that the change does not deplete my external resources either.

**Creating sustainable change**

Usually the goal is change that is sustainable. The trick to that is to determine what effort can be maintained for long enough for the new change to become habituated, for a person to establish a new balance point. Traditionally this is regarded as 3-4 weeks, but that is not a magical time period. Habituation depends on creating a repeated situation where the thought process is exactly the same each time, where the choice is always the same. The less variation, the less the conscious thinking, the faster the habituation.

**Sustainability must be feasible in both inner and outer reality**

Habituation is about internal reality, but also about the relational realities the change affects. Therefore the effort must be measured in terms of sustainability in my inner reality AND in the external reality I am in relationship with. I may find it effortless “mentally” to be extremely generous, but external shared reality will very likely not find that effortless and may well not find it sustainable.

While it may be possible to achieve a great change all at once through exerting great effort, if the effort is not sustainable, or is even mildly erratic, habituation is not implemented and the balance point does not shift. When the effort is done, the situation returns to the old normal because it never was “normal and effortless” anywhere else.

If the effort cannot be sustained long enough, neither can the successes the effort brings. We have achieved change, but not the kind we really want. We want things to **remain** different, not simply to have a brief time of being changed. **Sustained change is not about mustering up enough effort to reach the goal, as most people are apt to believe – instead it is about changing how we react to the goal, about changing our non-conscious brain. The goal is non-conscious change. The goal is to change our internal reality so that it sustains the new choices automatically.**

**Therefore the process isn’t about how much willpower you can create, or what ways you can find to force yourself into different choices. It is instead about how to work with our non-conscious brain to persuade it to do things differently.**

**The process for making a sustainable change**

Here is how this is best approached:

Attempt the change you want – all of it. Gauge the effort. Push the effort towards the goal ONLY until it feels like too much to maintain, then back off by slight increments **until you reach the point where you feel you can consistently apply the same effort for at least the next three weeks or a month.**

**Once you have a sense of this point, then back off a little more.** Allow for imperfect circumstances by setting the actual amount of effort/interim goal 10-20% below what you think you can achieve. **Why? You want a “can’t fail” point rather than a “hope I won’t fail” point, because any inconsistency (ANY failure to maintain the identical behavior) will break the process of habituation and cause you to have to start it all over again.**

It is often quite hard to accept smaller gains, smaller steps, than you might like – it seems like not doing enough. It may seem paradoxical, but this is actually far more likely to give you faster results than taking that bigger step you feel you might be able to achieve. Why? Larger steps are usually overly-optimistic: they usually fail to anticipate the high likelihood of you encountering some sort of unexpected circumstances that put extra pressure on your resolve, that ask for even more energy than you expected. They also often fail to recognize that our energy has normal ups and downs – **that the measure to use is not your best or even normal days but for what energy you have for this change on your worst days.**

Simply put, if you have no “cushion,” the probability is very high that you will fall short of consistently and unwaveringly maintaining the larger step you want.

Why is this such a big deal? Our rational thinking is used to the idea of probabilities, and it is fine with something happening 8 times out of 10. It is therefore easy for us to misunderstand how devastating to making the change become unconscious and automatic ANY inconsistency is. **Our unconscious wants to see a specific predictable point, not an approximation, and it wants a certainty of something happening, not a maybe. Habituation is created by NO variations, not even a single day. It is based on the idea of absolute predictability.** “9 times out of 10” still requires some conscious thinking about the outcome: it won’t slide into the unconscious.

Our nonrational thinking wants more certainty -- It wants, say, a minimum of 25 or more “exact samenesses” in a row. If you fall short at 18, it starts the count all over again at 0. You end up having wasted the effort of the 18 days to achieve a new “normal.” That’s why it’s better to work in steps you know you can do, rather than those you hope you can do or “ought to” be able to do.

**“How long, Lord, how long?”**

If you got excited at the idea of only needing 25 repetitions to make the new change become habitual, I’m sorry to say that that was just an example, not a magic threshold. The actual number will vary depending on how much the change is independent of other unconscious patterns or is imbedded in them. The more imbedded the thing you want changed is in other patterns, the more they have to change as well, and so the more resistance there will be to accepting this change

The good news is that some changes can be habituated quite quickly, perhaps in as few as a dozen tries. The bad news is that others take much longer than we might expect, because we are not conscious of all the associated patterns involved. This is another reason to be sure that the effort you are putting forward can be maintained for a long time.

The unconscious patterns that are likely to have the most associations are those you have had a long time and/or those that affect many areas of your life. Change is harder if you are replacing an old, well-established pattern, not just creating a new one. If the habit is extremely well-set, it will likely take longer than 3-4 weeks to re-habituate to a different behavior, or, alternately, the change may need to be even more gradual, at least at first. Consider using an effort that will be sustainable for longer than a month In addictions recovery, the traditional time period used is 90 days. Relapses start the time period over anew.

**The Step-Plateau-Step Approach**

The other time factor is, of course, that involved in taking small steps. If the goal is sufficiently large that it can’t be done in a single small step, then the following pattern will be the path best taken.

Your first step will, sooner or later, become habituated and act as the4 new normal. You will maintain the change without having to think about it consciously – your unconscious will now automatically enact the necessary decisions. This is the plateau stage.

In the plateau stage you cease making further progress. THIS IS GOOD. What it means is that you are now unconsciously maintaining the new change you just made. This is the new normal, and you are automatically maintaining it. That’s what you wanted. Allow it to be for awhile.

Once you feel confident that this is the new established “normal” for you, go through the same process as before – identify the amount of effort you can sustain over the next month or so to unfailingly create the same choices, then start doing that. You are now taking the next step.

After a time this will itself habituate and you will plateau again. Once again, this is a good sign, not something to be discouraged about. Once you feel confident that this is your new normal, start a new step.

Repeat this until you get to the final goal you initially wanted.

**Ways to increase success: create your own peer pressure**

Once you have determined a sustainable step goal, assist yourself in reaching it consistently by doing all you can to adjust your external reality relationships to reinforce the goal. This can be done in many ways. One excellent way is to increase the amount or frequency of interacting in relationships that already have the new normal you desire. We have an innate drive to be in harmony in relationships, and this drive will act as an unconscious pressure on you to “normalize” or acclimatize to their effortless normal.

Remember that your new normal is going to be what you can sustain until it becomes effortless and “natural” to you. This will most often not be your ultimate goal, only a step towards it. Connecting to relationships which are operating at this next step level will usually prove better for you than connecting to relationships which operate at a “normal” level which is too high a level for you to sustain: the drive to harmony will cause those to pull you into overexerting your current resources, into unsustainable effort. So limit these relationships for the time being; they will have a place later.

The next-step relationships you establish will be transitional – you want to plateau there and then move on to the next step. This can pose a problem. What if the relationships are ones you don’t want to discard or end? If they can “grow with you” towards the same ultimate goal, at about the same rate, they can be maintained. If they do not, they will become a negative influence for your next step, and need to be limited so that they do not discourage further progress. Simply put, the drive to harmonize will work against you moving forward and towards you staying where you are.

It may help to understand this by thinking how people move up in responsibilities in a job. A receptionist associates with sales persons and uses those relationships to help her become a sales rep. When ready for the next step, she then associates with persons learning middle management skills and, to a lesser extent, with those already having these – perhaps enrolling in school or finding a mentor. She becomes a manager, and now associates with other managers -- and finds that many or most relationships with the sales reps. fade away or are lost.

After a time as manager, she aspires to be an executive. She again begins associating with those also headed in that direction and, to a lesser extent, with those already there. When she becomes an executive, she develops new relationships with other executives. In the process, most of her relationships with middle managers wither or wane, and relatively quickly she finds she no longer associates much with persons who are still moving towards executive positions.

The bad news here is that her relationships are mostly transitional ones. The drive towards harmony means she no longer “fits in” with her former relationships and these become uncomfortable – they have different normals. The good news, however, is that we as individuals have many more than simply the one dimension of our career or job. Long-term relationships are typically far more complex than some single dimension, and they can be maintained as long as other dimensions of them are valid to our present norms. The nature of the relationship changes: we may no longer share the same level of work position, but find that now the relationship is more about sharing similar goals regarding raising a family -- the focus changes from one dimension to another. In our example above, our executive can maintain relationships with anyone she has met: the basis of the relationship just becomes less job-oriented.

**Ways to increase success: get direct support from others**

A second way to increase the pull towards your new normal is to enlist current relationships in your effort. In the example above, if our heroine is a sales rep, another sales rep can encourage her to advance to management even though that is not that person’s goal for his- or herself. Usually we need to initiate this support ourselves, at the very least by disclosing to the other person our intended change, and often by directly asking for support and identifying what that support would be (as specific as possible).

We are well-advised when we talk with others to **identify our sustainable effort next step as the goal to focus on, not the long-term goal.** By doing so the persons we enlist to help will be less likely to inadvertently encourage us to exert an unsustainable amount of effort, and will also not be confused or angry with our satisfaction at staying for a time at a plateau stage that is below our ultimate goal.

**Biting off more than one can chew**

If we shoot too high for what we can sustain, or if others we are in relationship with consistently do so, we can become resentful of them or discouraged and angry at ourselves. We can then easily confuse ourselves into believing we do not have the ability to reach our larger goals, when the problem is really that we do not understand the process of getting to them. **The great act of courage is sometimes found in setting small goals rather than large ones.** To say you intend to lose 5 pounds when you need to lose 50 is much harder than saying you intend to lose the whole 50.

**Limitations**

**There are no internal reality limitations to where we set our “normal” – we are bound only by what we believe can be true and what effort or risk we are willing to accept. In internal reality we are limited only by our ability to dream and to imagine.**

**In external reality, there are far more limitations.** Time, energy, money, resources, connections, physical limitations – these are only a few. What do we do about those? Again, there are many possibilities.

We usually will need to change the part of external reality we interact with, finding one which can be in harmony with our internal reality. This can be as simple as changing who we interact with, or as complex as moving to another country, depending on the nature of the change we want to make.

Most larger communities have enough variety that a person can find others who match the next step forward, and opportunities to enact our changes. If our changes take us into more rarefied levels, we may require a geographic move or simply some form of interactive electronic communication. **Don’t worry about that step until you come to it: things have a remarkable way of working out when you are at the right level.** They also have a remarkable way of not working out when you are at the wrong level – too low or too high, either one. That triggers the laws of imbalances into action – but that is a topic for another place and time.

**The value of limitations in shaping realities**

Limitations are normal in external reality. They aren’t obstacles as much as “shapers” – temporary containers of energy and flow. There is a value in the limitations provided by a pot – how else can one cook soup?

I believe there are always values in limitations: the problem usually is not the limitation itself, but that there is a disharmony between the limitations of the part of reality you are in and the goals of your inner reality. Some people are happy in the limitations of poverty, or isolation, or even disability. Some people are happy in the limitations of fame or wealth or power. **The question is how to use the limitations you have, or how to move to a reality with different limitations.**

Some limitations are acceptable, but others are not. If the limitations are galling, then remove them. If they are helpful, retain them. If you are uncertain whether they are helpful, explore them. Sometimes the grass is greener, but it’s far more important if it’s simply more the shade of green you like.

**Form and meaning**

Adjust your external reality to support your next step. Form is less important than meaning, but meaning requires form to express itself. **You are looking for the forms that help you express your meaning: don’t be confused that a particular form IS a meaning, or the only way it can be expressed.**

If the traditional or culturally-accepted forms you need for your meaning are barred from you by the limitations of your part of external reality, then look for other forms. You can own things without money, you can have fame without talent, you can have prestige without merit. You can have pomp without circumstance. You can also have circumstance without pomp, or have money but not really own things, or talent without fame, or merit without prestige. Look wider. Look for how to express the meaning, not for how to get the form.

When making changes remember to concentrate on the meaning of the change rather than its form. In so doing you may find a form that is much easier to change to than the one you originally believed was the only way available. In our rather mundane example of losing weight, is losing weight the meaning or the form? Most likely it’s the form – the meaning might be to be healthier, or to avoid diabetes, or to be more attractive, or to feel less embarrassed, or to be sexier, or to increase job success, or all kinds of other things. All of those have other forms available.

Looking for meaning also helps avoid mistakes – if the meaning is “to be more attractive” and losing 50 pounds takes you from 130 to 80, then anorexia is the result. Don’t attach a form so closely to a meaning that you substitute the one for the other.

**Finally**

Finally, good luck! Literally. We exist in a world where our external reality can take control despite our will-power and intentions. Sometimes external events prevent change from happening. Timing is far more important a factor than our modern age wants to accept. Chance still operates as strongly as it always has. Sometimes it prevents us attaining what we think we want – and sometimes that isn’t at all a bad thing, as it can open us up to other options we were unaware of or had not fully explored.

A favorite Japanese poem for me is this:

My barn

Having burned

to the ground

I can now

See the moon.

Change is all around us. Sustainable change is about re-balancing, not about forcing an outcome. It is about sustainable effort to produce identical choices which become automatic habits. It is about the success of plateaus, the shaping of limitations, and the selection of forms which best express our meanings.

And it is about believing you can be what it is possible for you to be, and making that happen.

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