Using Sensory and Physical Associations for Making Changes

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**Our sensory experiences aren’t as “pure” as we believe them to be.**

Almost all of our experiences – even those of taste, sight, hearing, touch, and smell – involve associational thinking done unconsciously in our brain. A wonderful article on this can be found in the November 2, 2015 New Yorker. The article entitled “Accounting for Taste” highlights the research of Charles Spence, and includes the following surprising research findings regarding how one of our senses can influence another:

1. (Identical) potato chips with a louder crunching **sound** are judged to **taste** 15% fresher. (even if the sound is artificially enhanced or created).
2. Subjects report that strawberry mousse served in a white container tastes 10% sweeter than when served in a black one.
3. Coffee served in a white mug tastes twice as intense as that served in a clear glass mug – but also tastes only 2/3rds as sweet.
4. Adding 2 ½ ounces of weight to a yogurt CONTAINER makes the yogurt inside seem 25% more filling.
5. Bittersweet toffee tastes 10% more bitter if you eat it while listening to low-pitched music.
6. A cookie seems harder and crunchier when served from a rough-textured surface.
7. People are twice as likely to buy a juice drink where the drink’s label has a line that curves up like a smile than one whose label has a line that curves down like a frown – but when asked ascribe their buying decision to liking the taste better.
8. When Coca-Cola used all-white cans in 2011 people complained that it had changed the drink’s formula. Coke stopped using the cans.
9. When Cadbury changed the shape of its chocolate chunks from rectangular to being more curved customers said the chocolate now tasted too sugary (Curved shapes make people think the food is sweeter.}
10. Cheesecake served on a round plate was rated as 20% sweeter than when served on a square plate.
11. Food served in a blue container seems saltier.
12. A bacon and egg dish served to the sound of bacon sizzling seems more bacon-flavored: the same dish served to the sound of clucking chickens seems more egg-flavored.
13. A chalkboard or wood surface feels smoother if you muffle the sound of rubbing chalk or sandpaper against it.
14. Dark beer tastes creamy and sweet when tasted while listening to a light, tinkling xylophone music, but the same beer “turns” mouth-dryingly bitter if the music changes to be that of a deep mellifluous organ piece.

ASSOCIATIONS are what I believe drive these “cross-sensory” phenomena.

How can you use this to make changes?

We’ve already discussed the importance of using words to describe the desired change which have good associations – to **shed** pounds rather than **lose** weight, to **revitalize** your lungs rather than to **give up** smoking, etc. Who wants to lose and give up?

But what other associations can you use besides words? Try using sensory associations, because our unconscious pays close attention to these. Our unconscious is constantly monitoring and evaluating our sensory inputs.

How might this work, then? You might put “unhelpful” foods in bilious green containers. Cookies will not just look less desirable, they will likely TASTE less pleasing. Conversely, you might try putting desired foods in or on fine crystal and china, associating these with gourmet and celebratory eating. You could put cigarettes in a container with a lid that makes an annoying sound (raspy, dry, sickly, screechy, etc.) when opened, and have your nicotine gum in a container that plays a pleasing or victorious tune when opened -- or that contains a picture of a favorite vacation.

(But NOT a picture of what you want to look like, or a statement of what you want to achieve in the future... you need to make associations to current or past real things, to actual strong positive associations you already have. The unconscious isn’t good at dealing with a future it hasn’t yet experienced – that’s more the domain of conscious thinking. The unconscious prefers the now and the past – and particularly the past. It also likes tangibles, stories, images, symbols, and iconic things. The words “Our vacation in Hawaii” don’t have as much impact as a picture of the vacation in Hawaii, or a seashell from that vacation. Go for tangible-sensory-iconic items whenever you can.)

Experiment here and use any of the senses – smells, textures, visuals, and sounds should all offer possibilities. Tastes may be more difficult, but still possible – what if before you snack you have a taste of toothpaste? (Tasting toothpaste may be part of a pattern that says “I’m done eating.”) Another possibility is that when you sit down to take care of that thing you avoid, always accompany that action with a food or drink item you strongly associate with success, vitality, or accomplishment. Or use music with those characteristics. Or a scent that has strong associations with those qualities. Or do so in a physical space that you associate with accomplishment and success.

Body positions can work as well – are you unconsciously reinforcing the behavior you want to change by doing it in comfortable settings or body positions? Often people do that; if so, you may want to change it. Perhaps you may want to associate the behavior you want to change with sitting in a particular chair, for example, allowing it to happen only there. Once the association becomes established then you may find that simply by sitting in the chair less and less frequently the behavior may change as well.

It is helpful to also be aware of the body posture you are in when doing a behavior you want to change, or when avoiding doing a behavior you want to start. If that posture is part of the underlying pattern, changing the posture can help disrupt the pattern. People who quit smoking often can find themselves automatically reaching for a non-existent pack of cigarettes; dieters can find themselves unconsciously walking over to the old snack-holding areas. Physical actions are part of our unconscious pattern as much as mental ones.

Use that knowledge to disrupt or deflect things. Changing these physical things is often easier than changing some of the other parts of the pattern, but can be just as effective in disrupting or deflecting it.

And if you feel the need to have something sweet, use a round plate!

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