

A Process For Changing Habits

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From the consciousness of Mindful Compassionate Dialogue a bad habit is one that doesn't meet needs for yourself or others. Changing a habit that isn't serving you can be very difficult. You may not have had many helpful models. Modeling for a change process often includes shaming, coercing, manipulating, and bribing yourself. You know these strategies are not life-serving, but they show up automatically.

Let's look at three life-serving possibilities for changing a habit:

1. Contemplation of the benefits
2. Contemplation of the costs
3. The power of conditioning

Contemplation Of The Benefits

The word contemplation, in this context, refers to a process of accessing an experience in body, heart, and mind.

Begin by identifying the new habit that will replace the “bad” habit in similar situations. As you turn towards the practice of contemplating the benefits of the new habit you want to create, begin by finding a quiet spot to sit comfortably and preferably upright. Bring to your awareness a time in which you already successfully engaged in the new habit. In your mind's eye see the situation as precisely as you can. Notice the lighting in the room, what posture you were in, the expression on another's face, and the surroundings. Replay any verbal interaction, if there was one. Scan your heart and body for any emotions and sensations and rest your attention on each for 10 or 15 seconds at a time. Then name the needs met in this situation. As you name the met needs let any other experience of the met need arise by itself and rest your attention there. Access the felt sense of engaging this new habit as completely as you can.

Next, name any conditions that supported you in engaging this new habit. What was the physical environment like? Who was there? Examine the events before this situation. What was it you did, participated in, received, etc. that gave you access to engaging this new habit rather than the old habit?

End by affirming your commitment to meet these needs in this new way. This might mean expressing something verbally (silently, aloud, or in writing) or engaging in a visualization, or simply breathing through your heart. Find whatever helps you integrate and ground in the truth of this experience.

Contemplation Of The Costs

When you have a critical mass of clarity about the cost to you and others of a particular behavior it becomes easier to interrupt. As you turn towards the practice of contemplating

the costs of the old habit, begin by finding a quiet spot to sit comfortably and preferably upright. First, resource yourself through metta, contemplation of benefit, anchoring, or whatever else that helps you remain in a compassionate expansive perspective.

Bring to mind a time when you engaged in the old habit. In your mind's eye see the situation as precisely as you can. Notice the lighting, shapes, colors, people and things around you. Replay any interaction, if there was one. Let associated emotions and body sensations and rest your attention on each for 5 or 10 seconds at a time. Then name the needs at cost in this situation for you and anyone else involved. As you name the needs at cost allow the feeling and process of grief. If any self-criticism shows up, greet it with compassion and remind those inner critics that this is actually a process that will protect those needs in future. Return your attention to the grief for needs at cost. Next, name any conditions that contributed to you in engaging this old habit. What was the physical environment like? Who was there? What was it that you did, participated in, received, neglected, etc. that gave this old habit space to come up? What needs were at cost for you or others when you engaged in this habit? What feelings were present in you when you experienced the result of these unmet needs?

End your contemplation of the cost session by affirming your commitment to noticing this habit the next time it arises and replacing it with the new one. This might mean expressing something verbally (silently, aloud, or in writing) or engaging a visualization, or simply breathing through your heart. Find whatever helps you integrate and ground in your commitment.

The Power of Conditioning

Now let's take a look at the power of conditioning. One of the most important things to remember is that change doesn't depend on your willpower alone. Habits are supported by conditions. Your experiences and behavior are, at least in part, born from conditioning. Conditioning can be an empowering phenomena. Once leveraged in the direction you want to go, it can give you incredible momentum.

Making use of the power of conditioning means changing the conditions in your life to support the new habit and taking support away from the old habit. Occasionally this means a complete upheaval of life. More often though, it means making different decisions little by little. These decisions are informed by your contemplation of benefits and costs.

Set aside time every week for this kind of reflection and contemplation. This kind of practice builds your capacity for clarity, compassion and insight. Little by little you will find yourself engaging in ways of thinking, believing, feeling, and behaving that more deeply serve life.

Practice

Pause for even one breath right now to identify something you've done today for yourself or others that is life serving