

How to remove yourself from temptation

Patterns are like soap operas, they keep on repeating; sometimes exactly as before, and sometimes thinly disguised iterations of what is essentially the same thing. Being tempted to 'fall off the wagon' of a New Year's Resolution is one of those patterns.

Patterns of the Past

There are a few things you can be confident about as you begin another year on planet earth; firstly, just as in every year that you can recall there will be things will happen that you weren't expecting, secondly, you will do things that you will look back on and say something like "WTF! What made me do that...again?"

If you tried to lose weight, get fit, get a better job, or find a life-partner without success in the past, then there's a reason why you failed. There are actually lots of reasons, all of which come together to form a pattern of behaviour that will achieve the same results that it has before. You failed, not because you didn't know what you 'should' do, but because you let yourself off the hook for doing it. Yet, you also have patterns of success in your memory banks; how many brides to be, or grooms to be for that matter, who've successfully shed loads of weight before their wedding? Isn't there a pattern there? You bet there is, and it's a simple one. First, get yourself a goal that you will find incredibly painful, one that you will never forgive yourself if you fail, one that carries real consequences for you. Second, treat every day as both an important and an urgent step on the road to its achievement, being sure that you make what you do really matter.

"You already know when, where and how you've been tempted in the past. It may be that you get cravings to do things that you know are self-destructive, so trying to pretend that somehow it'll all be different this year isn't too bright. The more you dredge up these memories and attach new choices to them, the less chance they will have of being repeated."

Patterns of the Present

Philosophers have long held that the appeal of a stale loaf of bread can have little to do with the bread itself, but instead with how hungry you happen to be. We communicate to both ourselves and other people with words, and words always have at least two meanings; firstly, what we imagine the word to mean if we looked it up in a dictionary, and secondly, our experience of that word in some context that makes sense to us. These 'semantic' and 'episodic' meanings come together to generate a specific meaning when we hear each word. When words come together, each meaning merges with the meaning that follows until the whole becomes something uniquely meaningful to us. The problem with this is that the default meanings that have let us down in the past will come back to haunt us if we let them. However, we will also have meanings that haven't been applied before, - we just need to ask ourselves better questions about what we are saying and what it means.

"If you rely on a plan to get you through then you are putting yourself at risk as soon as the plan is even partially derailed. However, if you are consciously asking yourself 'what could this mean?' or something like, 'If this was an opportunity rather than a possible threat, then what might it mean?', then the patterns of the present may be changed. It won't happen all at once, but bit by bit, slowly, and gradually those patterns will lead you away from temptation and toward doing what's right for you."

Patterns of the Future

Dreams, visions, missions, and future images of a better outcome start inside your head. If you want to build a house, you don't start by running down to the D.I.Y. store to pick up a stack of bricks do you? If you did, your house isn't going to amount to much. However, if you think about what your house should look like, what it must accomplish for you, how much it should cost, and how long you have to build it, then you don't by any means guarantee success, but you do give yourself a better chance of avoiding temptations that may prevent you from getting the house you could have had. What's true about building a house is as true for any other aspect of your life.

"When a dog chases a Frisbee they don't think about it, they just act. They keep their eye on the spinning disc and run alongside it until it starts to fall, and they catch it. Or, in the case of my dog 'Oscar' it hits him on the head, - Oscar has never been good at catching Frisbees. We will never know if the dog sees an image of themselves with the Frisbee caught in their mouth. Perhaps other dogs see it more clearly than Oscar? What is clearly beyond doubt is that the dog 'instinctively' knows what catching the thing looks, sounds and feels like, - and it runs as fast as it can toward that end result while keeping their eye firmly on the prize. At the risk of sounding like an insurance advert, we need to be more like a dog!"

Everything is memory

In fact, leading neuroscientists suggest that a really good way of thinking about the functioning of the human brain is to imagine the thin layer atop of the brain, - that wrinkled sheet that makes the brain look somewhat cauliflower-like, as being the only part of the brain that we consciously think with. They tell us that unlike any other part of the brain, the tiny nerve cells that make up much of this thin sheet have the potential to 'communicate' with any other cell within it. In practice this is possibly where the idea that much of the brains' potential is left unused comes from, because if it is possible for all of the cells to communicate with each other, but most of them actually don't, then it may be fair to say that much of the brain's potential remains unused. However, it's a bit misleading to then apply this to all brain functioning, as if bits of us are somehow dormant, - that's just daft! What isn't at all daft is to think about the bigger part of the brain, - all that pink and grey 'stuff' that makes up the bulk of what fills our heads, as being like one big memory store. All of the functions in this part of the brain have a unique job to do; the cells of which they are made 'communicate' to each other within each function, but not beyond it. The many hundreds of big and small functions keep us alive, allow us to interact with the outside world, and are transmitted to that upper 'thinking' layer by means of emotion. We act because we feel it is the right thing to do, even when it's not good for us at all, because we confuse the past memory of good feelings with the feelings of now. The bad news is that if we simply allow things to carry on as they have, then little will change and our emotions will cause us to make the same mistakes of the past. However, the good news is that we have the capacity to attach new meanings to old patterns to create new memories of 'now', and we also have the potential to create memories before reality has had a chance to catch up. These 'future memories' can be of our imagined self behaving in ways that support new patterns and achieving results that could never have happened if we'd clung to the patterns of the past.

Martin Goodyer