the six FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS of effective behavior change
Let’s start with the facts:
MOST

diets fail
MOST

inboxes aren’t zero
MOST

meditation efforts peter out
But sometimes...
But sometimes...

CHANGE HAPPENS
Smokers QUIT FOR GOOD
Smokers **QUIT FOR GOOD**

Alcoholics **SOBER UP**
Smokers **QUIT FOR GOOD**

Alcoholics **SOBER UP**

Couch potatoes **SHAPE UP**
BUT HOW?
Hi, I’m Jason.
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I’m the cofounder of a tech startup, a former NCAA gymnast & blog at The Art of Ass-Kicking.
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But to truly understand, you must teach. So I put together a class based on what I’ve learned.
In Jan 2012, I taught **167 students** on Skillshare about *The Science of Willpower and Habits*
We covered a lot in the class
But perhaps the most practical part of the class was the fundamental elements of change.
I studied the data...

10+ years of personal behavior change as a student / athlete / entrepreneur
100+ peer-reviewed academic papers
400+ data points from class participants
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...and found the fundamentals.

Six elements that appear in nearly every successful behavior change effort
They are:

1) tracking behavior
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2) triggers & reminders
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3) specific actions
They are:

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2) triggers & reminders
3) specific actions
4) rewards
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4) rewards
5) setting targets
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6) review & recommit

We’ll look at each in turn.
Tracking a behavior makes you more likely to do the right thing, and less likely to do the "wrong thing"
A review of 22 weight loss studies found that:

“Consistent self-monitors of exercise not only achieved significantly greater weight loss but also experienced fewer difficulties with exercise and exercised more often.”

Source:

Self-Monitoring in Weight Loss: A Systematic Review of the Literature
Burke (2011) Journal of the American Dietetic Association
TRACKING

Paper Options
Moleskin
Post-it Notes
Calendar

Digital Options
Evernote
Lift
iDoneThis
TRIGGERS

Use triggers of place, time, feelings, other people and prior behaviors to remind/spur yourself to do the right thing.
As one student from the course said:

“Consistent self-monitors of exercise not only achieved significantly greater weight loss but also experienced fewer difficulties with exercise and exercised more often.”
**TRIGGER**

**Place:** bathroom, office, car

**Time:** waking up, noon, arbitrary alarm

**Feeling:** hunger, stress, fatigue

**Other People:** spouse, boss, kids

**Prior action:** after brushing teeth, eating meal, getting home, starting work
When you give yourself a specific action to take, you are more likely to follow through. Too many choices leads to indecision.
SPECIFIC ACTION

A study done on legislators responsible for funding (or shutting down) public hospitals:

“Legislators were 2.4x more likely to “refuse to choose” when dealing with two underperforming hospitals (64%) vs only one (26%)”

Source:
Medical Decision Making in Situations That Offer Multiple Alternatives
SPECIFIC ACTION

Examples

Vague: “Work out more”
Specific: “Run for 30 minutes around the park”

Vague: “Eat healthier”
Specific: “Make fruit smoothie for breakfast”

Vague: “Be more productive”
Specific: “Set 3 priorities each day and work for at least 25 mins straight on each one”
Frequent and immediate positive feedback is crucial for developing habits and motivating the right behavior.
**REWARDS**

**Rewards tell us we’re doing the right thing**

Habits are developed in the limbic brain which is reinforced by rewards / positive feedback:

Imaging on human subjects show dopamine release (pleasure) + increased blood flow in basal ganglia (part of the limbic brain) when presented with potential rewards like winning money or getting food if subject is hungry.

**Source:**


REWARDS

Examples

Gold stars (really!) on your calendar/journal
Earning points toward a massage, nice meal, small trip you get for yourself
Small purchases/pleasures (buying a game, a bite of chocolate)
Victory dance / cry of triumph
Bragging on social media
Setting a target (a goal + near-term date) focuses you on taking immediate action — and you know you won’t have to do it “forever”
Elderly patients recovering from difficult hip surgery were given booklets — told to set weekly goals for recovery and make specific plans to achieve them.

“Patients who had written plans in their booklets had started walking almost twice as fast as the ones who had not. They started getting in and out of their chairs, unassisted, almost 3x as fast.”

Source:
Motivational and Volitional Processes in Action Initiation: A Field Study of the Role of Implementation Intentions
TARGETS

Examples

“Build up to 15 mins of plank, pushups, & yoga each morning over next 30 days”

“Run the upcoming Nike Half Marathon without walking”

“Complete 100 pomodoro’s on side project by April 1, 2013”

Write it down and post it: bathroom mirror, Facebook, to a friend
After reaching your target date/goal, review your progress. What went well? What could be improved? And then make a new plan for the next step of the process.
REVIEW & RECOMMIT

Similar to a software project post-mortem:

“A postmortem is a procedure whereby you summarize a project's history and analyzes its positive and negative aspects. The goal of a postmortem is to draw meaningful conclusions to help you learn from your past successes and failures. Despite its grim-sounding name, a postmortem can be an extremely productive method of improving your development practices.”

- Steve Pavlina
Examples

“I was able to stick to my habit on weekdays, but weekends were tricky - how can I fix this?”

“Setting a reminder for a specific time of day wasn’t as effective as when I associated with a pre-existing habit.”

“Instead of grabbing dinner with my foodie friends, I should meet up with them for drinks so I’m not tempted.”

“I’m proud of the progress I’ve made. It’s been hard but worth it. I’m going to set a new goal for the next quarter”
THE FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE BEHAVIOR CHANGE

- TRACKING
- TRIGGER
- ACTION
- REWARD
- TARGET

Learn more at jasonshen.com
THANK YOU