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Reversing the forces of habit

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WE are all "walking bundles of habit", American psychologist and philosopher William James suggested, and modern psychology offers little to counter this humbling view. It is true that we humans enjoy the remarkable capacity of self-reflection. This inner voice can sound impressive enough as it admonishes us to eat more fruit, watch less television, and floss after brushing. Yet only a tiny proportion of our behaviour is steered by carefully reflected reason. The great bulk of our actions flow automatically, effortlessly and mindlessly from the "enormous flywheel" of habit, as James put it.

This is why we often envy people for their good habits. Their virtue comes so easily. To my husband, for example, filing a document is as natural as breathing. Yet for me there is no such magical trigger in a piece of paper, however vital it may be. James recommended making "automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can". (My husband no doubt would chime his assent to this most loudly at tax time.)

But what are the options once our neurons are set in their ways? How do we retrain the unconscious to replace its disregard of an invoice with a snappy command that will smoothly direct feet towards the filing cabinet?

As irritated spouses are quick to point out, you can start by making an effort. You can relieve an envelope of its contents and make the reedy voice of conscience call out: "File it! Now!" The flywheel of old bad habits then will grind painfully to a halt and, only a few tax years later, hopefully a new, improved habit will have been formed. This strategy certainly can work. But as we all know from the experience of New Year's resolutions, more often it does not. Conscious resolve is simply too feeble and unreliable.

If, as we open the post, this part of our brain just happens to be engaged elsewhere or we're in one of those tired and crabby moods, the flywheel spins unchecked.

Fortunately, there is a better approach. New York University psychology professor Peter Gollwitzer and colleagues seem to have discovered a way to develop good habits instantly. The secret is not just to make a resolution. You also need to work out exactly how and when you intend to carry it out. To use the grandly official jargon, you must form an "implementation intention". Once this simple and relatively painless procedure is over, volition can be bypassed altogether. The unconscious is put on high alert for situations in which you claim to be determined to change your behaviour. This automated warning system then helpfully mimics the effects of the well-worn groove of habit.

These implementation intentions can have near-miraculous effects, it appears. Of particular interest to anyone who always underestimates how long it will take to get a job done - that is to say, just about everyone - is a study that investigated whether implementation intentions could help overcome the "great planning fallacy" (as psychologists smugly refer to it). A group of university students was asked to write a "day in my life" essay during the course of a week and to predict when they would complete it. Showing the ubiquitous overconfidence of the planning fallacy, on average each student anticipated finishing the work more than a day earlier than they eventually did.

However, another student group given the same assignment also made implementation intentions. They had to outline exactly when and where they intended to write their essay. Each student then spent a few quiet moments picturing themselves buckling down to the task in that time and place while their inner voice silently committed to the plan of action. These students were even more optimistic than the other group in their estimates of when they would finish the work. Yet their predictions were remarkably realistic. For the students

who made implementation intentions, the work plan unfolded exactly as imagined.

Implementation intentions also improve, to a striking extent, the chances that we will undertake some exercise, recycle paper, reach for an apple instead of a chocolate bar or find the time to examine vulnerable portions of our anatomy for signs of disease. As Gollwitzer puts it, those who practise the intentions enjoy the "strong effects of simple plans". The implementation intention is a way of making an effort, but with less effort.

The voice of inner reason suggests that I should try it myself. I will still be a walking bundle of habit, but you never know. I could, finally, be walking towards the filing cabinet.

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