



Shifting Behavioral Habits through Multi-Level Self-Observation

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Habits are conditioned patterns of behavior. We can think of them as our default responses to life's complexities. We learned them well, presumably, because they worked for us earlier in life. Our habits, taken together, form our personalities and our tendencies in how we respond to life.

Given who we are now and choice to develop and respond differently to life, we may begin to discover that these habits limit our creativity, render us ineffective, or cause us to suffer. So, we decide to change. However, most of us discover that changing these limiting habits is difficult.

While it is not necessary to understand the origin of our habits in order to change them, it is critical to understand their nature. This is true because habits are deeply embedded in our bodies. Changing them requires change on a biological level, and coaching that fails to take this into consideration is less likely to be successful.

Understanding the nature of habits allows us to work skillfully both with our own habits and those of our clients. With the development of deep self-awareness (really, an expanded sense of how we, as organisms, are responding to life in the moment) we find ourselves with real choices about whether to follow habits, or, choose new responses that may be more useful.

To be clear, this article is not a description of how to coach. Rather, I'm providing a description of the nature of habits, and the capacity of self-observation to help us, as fundamentally biological organisms, to shift these habits. Specific coaching strategies follow logically from this, but are beyond the scope of this article.

Habits

Habits can be anything that we do habitually, without conscious choice. Examples might be our tendencies to rise to a perceived challenge, to abandon our own legitimate needs in the face of requests from others, or to feel closer when we relate to what another is saying. Habits can be as subtle as a hunch, a slight body movement, or an urge to speak. Or, they can be dramatic and obvious to everyone around us, as when someone is provoked into a petty argument by another person who wants to exploit their predictable tendency to over-react.

Fundamentally, we are more effective and fulfilled in life to the extent that we can respond to what the world offers us with freely chosen, creative, and effective actions. Our range of possible responses to any one circumstance is vast. Habits constrict this range, providing limited "default" behaviors with which we have a strong tendency to lead. Awareness of both our default habits, and a range of alternatives, provides the opportunity for freely chosen optimal action.



Physiological Aspects

First, it is necessary to understand that we are our bodies. Our bodies have practiced responding to the world since we were born. In fact, our bodies are “incapable of not practicing,” and they get better at what they practice. The more narrow and predictable our tendencies in life, the more our particular musculo-skeletal/nervous/endocrine systems begin to hold patterns of behavior that help us survive and make sense of a complex world. While these patterns are largely unconscious and automatic, they still rule us.

The tendency to respond in a particular way is rooted in, and flows from, the highly complex system we call our body. Even in modern life, with all our technology and sense of control of our environment, we still inhabit the world as a fundamentally biological organism.

Research has clearly demonstrated that our nervous systems have a measurable motor impulse up to half a second before we consciously choose to initiate a volitional movement. The implications of this are profound. Even when we are choosing to make a movement (say, raising our arm) the conscious choice follows the body’s initiation of the motion. It appears that the body initiates and the cognitive mind follows with an after-the-fact decision to do what, in fact, the body has already decided to do. It’s as if the mind (our volition, or intentions) is trying to justify itself by pretending it was in charge all along!

Habits, then, begin in the body. I invite you to be mindful of how this happens within you, so that you can validate it for yourself. What follows will provide the means to do so.

Habit Patterns

Habits have five elements, forming a pattern. These include a trigger, a constellation of conditioned responses that arise rapidly and sequentially through three levels of experience, and a resulting behavior.

- Trigger: something happens in our environment that we register through our senses, and that evokes a response.
- Conditioned responses:
 - Somatic response: how our body automatically responds to this sensory input. This is the biological organism responding, and is observable as sensation (energy, tension, tightness, warmth, tingling, numbness, etc.) Generally, this is the first element of a constellation of linked responses.
 - Emotional response: the feelings that arise, based on our deep history. Observable as emotions (impatience, compassion, threatened, anger, anxiety, joy, excitement, etc.) This follows the somatic response.
 - Mental response: the “mental formations” that provide meaning for our experience, and rationale for our response. Observable as language (stories, interpretation, justification, etc.) Because this is the highest order of response, it



generally follows the first two, although the entire constellation can arise in less than a second.

- Resulting behavior: the action that flows automatically out of the constellation of phenomena that arises. Observable as reflex movements, actions, speech acts, etc.

Most of us recognize that, given certain triggers, we tend to respond in certain ways. Learning to recognize the patterns that underlie these habits is key to recognizing them and changing them. The key is mindful exploration of how our automatic somatic, emotional, and cognitive responses to a trigger lead us into a default response.

The Premise of Change

Traditional approaches to changing behavior often rely on a cognitive understanding of the need for change, the intention to change behavior, and the self-discipline to choose a new behavior over a habitual behavior. Given the “hard-wired” nature of habits, however, this often doesn’t work. The approach depends on willpower, and ignores the underlying structure of the habit itself. Ask a smoker who’s tried to quit, a heart attack victim whose doctor tells him that he needs to change his lifestyle, a micro-managing executive, or anyone who’s made New Year’s resolutions, only to see them fall apart within weeks.

If habits are in part physiologically driven, then real change requires more than good intentions and cognitive awareness. We must intervene on the level of the organism. I hold that changing habitual behaviors requires, in order:

- Having motivation to inquire into the habit
- Observing the biological nature of our patterned response
- Discovering and practicing alternatives
- Interrupting our automatic tendencies in the heat of the moment, and
- Replacing the automatic behavior with an unfamiliar new one.

This is asking a lot of a fundamentally biological organism! At the core of this sequence, from a behavioral change standpoint, is the necessity of slowing down the habitual response so that we have a greater opportunity to make a choice. Multi-level self-observation is a practical, mindfulness-based tool for doing this. This is the focus of the rest of this article.

Multi-Level Self-Observation

A helpful stance in shifting habits is to be curious about them, and to “make friends” with them. Habits are there because our organism has learned well how to get along in the world. Our habits have served their purpose. Now, we are becoming curious about their subtleties, and being mindful of the entire pattern of responses that give rise to the habit.



This is different from working at changing the behavior, which is fundamentally oppositional. Rather, we are expanding and deepening our awareness of something that is in fact quite complex and miraculous.

The secondary effect of this awareness is that, down the road, we'll become able to sense the first arising of the pattern, and choose whether to follow our habit or replace it with something new. The progression starts with self-observation.

Self-observations help us:

- Develop greater self-awareness and presence,
- Develop the capacity to observe our behavior objectively,
- Become familiar with the earliest indications that a habit is arising,
- Replace the inner critic with neutral self-acceptance, and
- Stay present and at choice during a triggering event.

Self-Observation as Designed Action

Self-observations are of tremendous value, and can be designed for nearly any behavior, including both behaviors that you would like to use, or that you use excessively or inappropriately.

Self-observations are simply a structure designed to observe a specific behavior consistently over some period of time. The more frequently a habit can be observed, the more useful the self-observation, which simply an attention-focusing device. A journal, or other system for recording observations, is of great help. A self-observation usually defines:

- the behavior to be observed (e.g., interrupting others in meetings,)
- the timing of the observation (e.g., at the end of each workday, or after each staff meeting,)
- the length of time to do the self-observation (e.g., for the next two weeks,) and
- specific questions to be considered about what happened, what your inner experience was, and what the results were.

The questions are designed to shine light on the nuances of the pattern as it arises. In particular, we want to design questions that focus on the subtleties of the three levels of awareness: somatic, emotional, and cognitive. We cultivate neutral observation of the entire chain of causality from the trigger to the resulting habitual behavior.

Given this, a simple generic set of self-observation questions might be:

- What happened that triggered your habitual behavior?
- What did you notice in your body just before your habitual response?
- What emotions or feelings did you notice just before your response?



- What action did you take?
- What did you tell yourself so that the action made sense? How did you justify it in your mind?
- What were the results of this action?

Evolution of Awareness

Using self-observations over time leads to change generally as follows:

- We use 20/20 hindsight to reflect at the end of our day. We remember that we actually did engage in some heinous behavior (for example interrupting others) earlier in the day. We jot down notes about the details of our experience, and become increasingly curious.
- After several days, we become increasingly attuned to the behavior. We begin to notice it sooner. (“Oops! I just interrupted Joe!”) Still hindsight, but closer in time. And, we are more able to observe the various responses that precede the behavior (e.g., a sense of energy in the chest, a feeling of impatience, and judgmental thoughts about the speaker we’re about to interrupt.)
- Soon, the internal observer, which we’ve been cultivating, begins to notice what we’re doing as we do it. (“I’m interrupting Beth right now!”) Because the bulk of our awareness is wrapped up in the critically important thing we’re interrupting Beth to say, we finish saying it anyway, but awareness is dawning.
- We begin to notice our impulse before the behavior. (“I feel my energy increasing and my back straightening. I feel impatient. I’m thinking that Joe doesn’t have a clue. I’m about to interrupt! No, this time, I’m going to hear him out instead. Slow down, relax, breathe, listen. Ask a question.”)

Now, we are changing behavior. Additional strategies, such as studying and practicing alternative behaviors, are also important. However, self-observation of the somatic, emotional, and cognitive aspects of our experience is at the core.

Self-observation is, then, both a cognitive exercise in studying habitual behaviors, and an affective device that places us into deeper awareness and presence. It is through being really present that we see the real choice points that exist in every situation.

Summary

Because of the physiological basis of most behavioral habits, it is often insufficient to rely on logic, intentions, and willpower to change behavior. Fortunately, we are able to bring mindful self-observation to bear on our habits. Without trying to change behaviors, self-observation leads to behavior change in part because we become more informed about the nuances of our particular habits, and in part because through the act of self-observation itself, we become more present and able to choose.