



If you've struggled to change some behavior but always come up short, there's still a way forward.

But, it's probably not what you might expect.

When determined to change, we often go for the psychological jugular. Consider wanting to start an exercise routine. Changing from sedentary to active, logic suggests, simply requires an application of will, of putting mind over matter.

Often, what follows is an attempt to hold one's self accountable, such as using a workout tracker, electronic notifications, exercise equipment, joining a fitness center, and such. Often, there are also little motivational tricks, like setting up a reward system, finding a buddy to exercise with, as well as all the "you can do it" mantras floating about the body psychologic.

Yet, many fail when taking this direct route. Why?

Well, commanding yourself to do something that one part of you desires but another does not is a surefire recipe for creating resistance within yourself. Nobody wins an inner civil war. When the "let's exercise" part of you starts issuing demands to do this or that, along with dire warnings about what ills will follow by failing to comply, the "let's chill" part of you remains unmoved.

If we try and fall short in changing a behavior enough times, we generate a psychological firefight that reignites each time we give it another college try. It's a war of mental attrition, and rarely won by either side.

What to do? Well, when the front door to a particular change is barred, there's no sense slamming one's head into it. Instead, the conundrum calls for a flanking maneuver. It's called "breakout change."

Just as a military unit often achieves tactical advantage by outflanking an adversary, the "let's change" part of you can sometimes bypass its "let's not" counterpart by adopting a new behavior unrelated to the initial goal itself (exercise). This new behavior change needs to be significant, roughly on a par with that of the original goal.

For example, after a long and futile struggle to give up smoking, Christine felt helpless and hopeless.

“After all these failures, I don’t think it’s possible for me,” she lamented.

“Let’s forget smoking for now and focus on changing something else in your life,” I suggested, the idea being to push back against her growing sense of impotence by creating a breakout change.

When stymied by our lack of progress in achieving a goal, it helps to back away from that particular challenge and take on another one that is more attainable. For Christine, this involved overcoming her lifelong fear of water by learning to swim. What’s that got to do with smoking cessation?

At first glance, nothing. However, at second glance, learning to swim is a demonstration to Christine that she can adopt new behaviors, that fear (which often undermines attempts at change) need not defeat her, and that her efforts do result in positive outcomes.

After learning to swim and one other breakout change, Christine overcame her smoking habit. She learned that personal transformation is attainable.

If you can’t get through change’s front door, find a window, and then hit it with a breakout change.