



Fit For Sisters

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Columnist

Understand the brain and make habits stick

Have you ever embarked on a diet or exercise plan, and noticed that pure intentions, willpower, and stick-with-it energy falls to the power of instant gratification?

This is so common not because everyone is weak or lazy, but because of the systems processor in our head. Yes, the brain is to blame for the late-night ice cream. It is discouraging, but understanding why you're having a hard time sticking to your program is a good way to armor yourself against the fallacies in our decision-making.

Imagine yourself in five years time: slender and fit,

happy and energetic. We all are striving for this model. What is it that you're doing right now to actualize that? This is the catch. Our brains can easily project the future, but cannot easily put forth the day-to-day behaviors that will get there.

The here-and-now brain is reliant on the basal ganglia, the part of the brain which is instinctual and less nuanced. It is the siren song of the "oh, that cookie looks good" automation between hand and mouth. These reactions happen without conscious thought — which is why they're so dangerous.

On the other hand our rational, emotional, and enlightened thinking resides in the prefrontal cortex. This thinking requires processing, and produces much more nuance in the way we behave. It's what our school teachers and mothers always wanted us to use when they

told us, "think before you act."

These two sides battle one another and, unfortunately, the basal ganglia has the upper hand in quick, thoughtless action. It was evolutionarily beneficial for this system to dominate in a time when it was harder to secure food and subsistence. Humans are wired to crave the very foods that are making us so sick with obesity.

How does the prefrontal cortex win? Begin by pleasing the basal ganglia with foods that are both healthy and hit the pleasurable salty sweetness chords. Season foods, use a little sugar, and stay away from the bland diet foods that are often idealized. The key is not to let the monster out of the cage. Protein will give you more satiety (feeling of fullness and satisfaction). Get ample protein at every meal or snack.

Now that the instincts are satisfied, look at what else causes the cascade of mindless snacking. Stress can greatly affect a person's cravings. It's been shown that a person with higher levels of stress responds less to sweet taste, creating a desire to consume more sweets. Sweets release a satisfying hit of dopamine in the brain. This neurotransmitter is responsible for feeling good; it's tied to many pleasant sensations, like seeing a loved one, succeeding in a goal, etc. It's also upregulated in eating delicious foods.

Sleep should be considered, too. There's a notion that a person who is sleep-deprived has a less active prefrontal cortex. Remember this is the rational area of the brain, the area that ought to be saying "don't eat all the donuts." Yet, when sleep-deprived, a person is far

more on edge, with the basal ganglia in control.

Removing the cache of sweet indulgences from reach is another key. In Brian Wansink's book "Mindless Eating" there are multitudes of examples of how the sight, smell, or ritual of a certain food can induce mindless grabbing. If it's on the counter, in plain sight, it will get eaten. In the cupboard stashed away is better. On the grocery shelf; the best.

Using a little knowledge of the dichotomy of the rational and primal instincts competing inside the head can be a key to helping someone struggling to understand their lack of consistency. They aren't weak. They're trying as hard as they can with what they've got. Please pass this information along, and use these mental tricks to help remove some of the dietary sticking points all people struggle with.

Dr. Thomas R. Rheuben

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