

The following is an excerpt from *Habit Change: Barriers and Solutions* written by Jeff Kaplan.

Think of the last time you attempted and failed to (1) start a new habit, such as exercise, (2) stop a habit, such as yelling at a loved one, or (3) change a habit, such as change your eating behavior. What was it that got in your way? Typical answers I've heard include: "Not enough time," "I got distracted," "I couldn't stick with it," and "I got lazy."

Over years of research and experience helping others change, I've noticed that all "barriers" seem to fall into one of five categories. Understanding the cause of your failure to change is an important step in creating lasting change. In this section, I introduce these five barriers and a simple way to recognize them. Later in this book you will learn ways to overcome these barriers.

First, you can be rest assured that any attempt to create significant change in your life is most likely going to be met with resistance. Why is this? It is because our ways of behaving are directly linked to the way in which we see ourselves. If you've been overweight for awhile and unsuccessful at losing weight, there is so much going on within and around supporting this image of yourself as overweight. Examples might include: being brought up in a household where it was unacceptable to not eat all the food served to you; knowing your favorite sales associate

at the Big and Tall clothing store; surrounding yourself with overweight friends and family members; selecting the same foods from the aisles at the same grocery stores and going to the same restaurants or fast food places; avoiding using a body weight scale; regular conversations with your physician about health problems related toward being overweight; the types of cars you purchase based on the drivers seat design; avoiding certain places, people or conversations because you're embarrassed about your weight; and seeing yourself as a failure when it comes to trying to lose weight.

Thus, what might seem like a simple task (e.g., eat better, exercise, and improve sleep) is actually an attempt to infiltrate an entire system of thoughts, feelings and behaviors associated with being overweight. Trying to change the outcome (i.e., lose weight) is going to be met with resistance from the entire system. Initial actions towards losing weight (such as one week of avoiding sweets) will be like a rubber band being stretched until it can stretch no more without breaking. Like releasing the rubber band you immediately go back to your known state, only a little more worn.

The five barriers to change are as follows:

1. Lack of Information or ill-defined goals
2. Lack of Motivation

3. Lack of Confidence or other psychological or medical issues
4. Lack of External Resources or Support
5. Values Conflict

Each one of these barriers can be quickly identified by how you feel when your attempt to change is met with resistance -- e.g., you find yourself choosing to skip going to the gym without just cause or you go for a second helping of dessert. Let's look at each barrier and the associated feeling.

Lack Of Information Or Ill-defined goals

Imagine that your goal is to lose weight and part of your plan is to exercise at least 30 minutes, three times a week. You're off to a good start by 1) choosing to exercise and 2) getting specific by committing to three times a week. However, let's look at some potential pitfalls:

It's Saturday night and you're exhausted after a day of holiday shopping. You've worked out twice thus far this week and only have one more 30-minute exercise session to honor your 3x/week commitment, but tomorrow is a long day of getting the house ready for a party, going grocery shopping and wrapping gifts. Getting on the treadmill is the last thing you want to do tonight or tomorrow. For a moment you're really bummed, realizing that you either have to workout or dishonor your

commitment. Then the light bulb goes off. “I’ve walked at least 30 minutes with all the running around I did today at the shopping malls.” The relief pours through your body. “Whew...avoided that problem.”

But did you really? What just happened is you bargained with yourself. And, while you can temporarily fool yourself into thinking you’re off the hook, your mind knows better. And, like the one loose thread that you pull from a piece of clothing, this action becomes the beginning of the end and the plan is ruined. Very shortly thereafter you stop exercising all together. Why did this happen? Because your action step was not clearly defined and like a good lawyer you found a loophole -- one that would serve you temporarily but would be the beginning of the end of your honoring your commitment.

Staying with the same theme, let’s say you begin your exercise program by running on the treadmill for 30 minutes at a moderate pace. The next time you get on the treadmill you decide you want to work out “better than last time” so you increase your pace and the length of time. The third time, motivated by the fact that you already notice your clothes fitting a little better, you further increase both your speed and time, really working up a sweat for nearly an hour. You continue this pattern for several weeks. At some point, you notice that you seem to have reached a plateau in your weight loss. Then, after several more weeks of this increased effort, you realize that not

only are you not losing weight—some weeks you’re actually gaining! Discouragement sets in and you eventually quit exercising altogether.

Had you had the correct information you would have realized that the level of extended exertion was actually traumatizing your body and one of the effects is a tendency to gain weight (having to do with the hormone Cortisol and other bodily reactions). This is a situation in which having lack of information led to failure.

Clearly defining your goal (and action steps) and gathering correct information is key to successful habit change.

EXERCISE



Identify a specific and measurable goal (e.g., lose 10 pounds) and a specific and measurable action step (e.g., walk 5 min/day, 3 days /week for 2 weeks). Be sure to clearly define your goal and action step and gather correct information necessary for success.

Lack of motivation

Have you ever decided to skip going to the gym because you were “too lazy?” Calling oneself lazy is disempowering. It seems to speak to some inherent unchangeable trait. A more

constructive approach is to consider the power of motivation. Imagine, for example, that you would be given \$100 million of tax-free money and be ensured eternal happiness for you and your family if you went to the gym six times over the course of a two-week period. Would you be “lazy” then or would you figure out a way to get to the gym?

Lack of motivation is one of the top two reasons people fail to follow through on their commitments (the other is lack of confidence, which will be discussed next). Understanding one’s “motivational boundaries” is key to identifying compelling action steps versus commitments you make because “you should” or that you make blindly.

Let’s take an example known to most people -- going to the gym (or running on the home treadmill or other form of regular exercise). You look in the mirror and are discouraged with how much weight you gained over the holidays. You feel motivated to lose the weight. In reality, you want the weight to be reduced but are you really motivated to change the behavior that led you to this result in the first place? True motivation requires an honest assessment of the sacrifices required to make your goal a reality. It also means a willingness to accept other changes that will occur as a result of such sacrifices -- for example disappointing friends, family and colleagues who want to share another glass of wine or say that you make them feel guilty for ordering dessert while you pass up on the 1,200 calorie post-

meal offering.

One of my clients who works for a large global organization would often use the excuse that he cannot manage his diet because of his travel schedule. Yes, eating healthily can be more challenging when you're on the road than when you are at home and when most of your meals are as a guest in settings in which it would be rude to reject the food offered.

But allowing this to be a barrier, rather than a challenge to overcome, is to give up your power to impact the change for which you seek. If you were gravely allergic to the foods being served would you figure out a way to still do your job and stay healthy? Once this executive was ready to take full responsibility for his weight loss and stop hiding behind excuses, he began a nutritional process that led to a 50-pound weight loss within less than 9 months.

One of the problems of setting action steps towards a particular outcome is that there are no guarantees that you will reach your goal -- then all that sacrifice will be for naught. Imagine the difference between a great authority guaranteeing you that if you take a set of specific action steps you will undoubtedly achieve the results you seek versus the more uncertain world that we actually live in which there are no hard and fast guarantees. Thus, when it comes to motivation, you have to: 1) first truly understand the sacrifices and impact of setting the

goal you seek to achieve, 2) be willing to make these sacrifices, and 3) be so fully committed to the process that you're willing to go forward with the necessary sacrifices without a guarantee of success.

EXERCISE



Using the goal you previously identified select three clear, specific, **SMALL** and measurable action steps by asking yourself the following: (1) What will help me reach my goal? (2) What am I really willing to do? (3) How will this positively and negatively impact my life? (4) What supports can I put in place to ensure success with each action step? **Commit only to steps you're confident of taking.**

Lack of confidence

Lack of confidence is the other top barrier to change. Said differently, “not believing or seeing yourself as having the desired goal” is one of the biggest barriers to taking the steps necessary to get you there.

Going back to the weight loss example, imagine that you've made repeated “half-hearted” attempts to reducing weight only to ultimately be unsuccessful. Your reason for failure could be related to many known and unknown factors, including the slowing down of metabolism as we age, the negative and

paradoxical impact of eliminating carbs from our diet or starving ourselves, being sleep deprived, getting distracted by the offer of high caloric foods, and being unaware of how many calories are actually in certain foods. A “failure self-image” develops with repeated failed attempts towards reaching a desired outcome. This makes it increasingly more difficult to achieve the goal.

Lacking confidence is one of the leading barriers to workplace success. It prevents leaders from seeking the help they need (because they’re afraid of being “found out”), limits creativity, and interferes with risk-taking.

Other barriers include psychological and medical issues. For example, an unchecked under-active thyroid could lead to weight gain, as could depression or high and constant stress. A drug or alcohol addiction also could have obvious impact on certain goals. Medical and psychological issues must be treated as part of any plan to change behavior in order to achieve desired outcomes.

EXERCISE



Using 20 words or short phrases describe yourself in relation to your goal. For example, if your goal were to be a better listener, descriptors might include: “bottom liner”, “insensitive”, “fixer”, “seek to understand,” etc.

Lack of support

Lack of external resources or support is another common barrier to success, especially in the work environment. Limited capital (people and financial), competing demands, disengaged boss, poorly skilled workforce, and time constraints can all contribute to failure.

Here is a personal example of lack of support using the weight loss example. Imagine that you are attempting to eat healthier and exercise as two parts of an overall plan to lose excess body fat. Your spouse and children refuse to give up having cookies, chips and other comfort foods and thus, these remain in your kitchen. If you had the right support, you could completely eliminate the “bad foods” from your kitchen, requiring an extra step of driving to the store before you could consume them. This can be very powerful in supporting efforts to eat healthier. However, you have to constantly refuse such foods that are easily accessible in your home if you’re unable to gain the support of your family.

With regard to exercise, let’s assume that your house is too small for a treadmill or other exercise equipment or your budget does not currently allow such a purchase. In addition, what if the closest gym is a good 30-minute drive away from your

house and in the opposite direction from where you work. How often do you think you will decide to not go to the gym when you know it's going to take at least an hour out of your already tight schedule?

It is important to get the necessary resources and support when attempting a significant change or attempting to achieve a specific goal.

EXERCISE



Based on your identified goal, list as many resources and supports you can come up with that will help ensure success. Then, separate into two lists -- “Must have support” and “Would like to have support”.

Values conflict

Perhaps the most overlooked change barrier by change agents is a conflict in values. From a business standpoint this could mean misaligned incentives. For example, imagine partners of a law firm attempting to create a more cooperative environment yet their compensation schedule is based on individual performance. Or imagine a workplace that tries to promote healthy work-life balance but promoted employees are ones who arrive very early and stay very late.

In a real-life example, a client of mine began a new weight-loss diet. After a couple of weeks, she reverted to eating the same food that she served her children. Upon questioning, she informed me that the only quality time she had with her kids was during dinner. However, her new meal plan required her to first cook the children's dinner and, while they were eating, to fix hers. My response, "Family is really important to you, isn't it?" "Oh, absolutely, it's more important to me than anything else," she replied. I then congratulated her on failing to honor her previous commitment to cook special meals for herself? Why did I honor her? Because even though health is very important to her, by cooking separate meals she was missing out on quality time with her kids and thus dishonoring a higher value, family.

EXERCISE



Write a list of your top 10 values then place them in order from most important to least important. (You can find a list of over 350 values on the Internet). Then, be sure that any action steps you've already identified or will create are aligned with these values. If not then modify the action step so that it does not interfere with a top value.

To obtain a copy of the complete e-book, *Habit Change: Barriers and Solutions* written by Jeff Kaplan, contact me at drjeff@drjeffkaplan.com.

The full copy will be available soon.

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