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Elephants and Chocolate

One of the illusions to which most of us is vulnerable is the notion that our behavior is primarily the result of logical and rational thought. I want to believe that what I say, what I choose, and how I act are thoughtful. Unfortunately, the science of human behavior says it isn't so. Yale University psychologist John Bargh, among numerous other scientists, offers compelling evidence that most mental processes (and their behavioral manifestations) occur automatically, often without conscious awareness.

Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist at the University of Virginia, uses a poignant metaphor to illustrate the strength of automatic behavior relative to intentional behavior... an elephant and a rider. The elephant represents the automatic functions and tendencies of our brains (the activity of some 100 billion neurons), while the rider represents those processes under conscious control. If the elephant wants to eat chocolate, what chance does the rider have?

From my standpoint, there are two very important points to be made using the elephant/rider metaphor. First, it vividly depicts the power of our automatic tendencies and behaviors, including those driven by emotion, and reflects how difficult it can be to change habitual behaviors. The second point is that elephants can actually be trained. The elephant can learn to walk past the chocolate, at least in the presence of certain cues.

With respect to health, the goal is to make those behaviors that contribute to good health as automatic as

possible. One wants her/his elephant trained to use a seat belt, go for the vegetables rather than the gravy, naturally gravitate toward the treadmill at the appointed time of day, reach for the dental floss, and go to bed on time. Yes, it can be a challenge for the rider to train the elephant to do these things, but with lots of practice and persistence, it can be done. An important key is to have cues in the environment prompting the elephant toward the desired behaviors. Once the elephant has been trained, it's a whole lot easier for the rider!

Indeed, there are still times when a trained elephant wants the chocolate and will get the chocolate in spite of the protests of the rider. But when it comes to healthy behaviors, perfection is hardly a realistic goal. The aim is for the elephant to have predominantly healthy habits (i.e., automatic behaviors), because habits are what will be expressed most of the time.

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