



e-quilibrium

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Automaticity

Most people operate motor vehicles rather effortlessly, but for a moment consider how very complex this task actually is. Driving involves simultaneously processing visual, auditory, and kinesthetic stimuli. Movements of one’s head, arms, hands, legs, and feet must occur in a coordinated fashion. At the same time, thoughts regarding the route to the destination are occurring. All of this happens while an individual may be more focused on speaking with another occupant in the car, listening to the radio, or thinking about the activities of the day. The act of driving an automobile illustrates how much of human behavior and thought is automatic. People are creatures of habit which means that well-practiced behaviors, thoughts, and routines can occur without much intention or effort. This is an important reason why one of the best predictors of future behavior is past behavior. Psychologists John Bargh (Yale University) and Tanya Chartrand (Duke University) use the term “automaticity” to describe how people respond to environmental, cognitive, and emotional cues in a robotic-like fashion.

With respect to automaticity and health behaviors, there is both bad news and good news. The bad news is that automaticity makes changing an unhealthy behavior quite difficult. The good news, however, is that once a healthy behavior becomes well-practiced, automaticity serves to help maintain it.

The automaticity phenomenon has implications for changing behavior, beyond the fact that behavior change is

difficult. Automatic behaviors occur in response to cues, so that one of the strategies for changing behavior is to alter cues for behavior. Examples of changing environmental cues include replacing the candy dish with a bowl of fresh fruit, noting the visit to the fitness center on the appointment calendar, and wearing a pedometer.

It is also possible to change cognitive cues, that is, thoughts about how one will respond in a desired fashion. New York University psychologist Peter Gollwitzer describes these “implementation intentions” as consisting of an “if... then” plan which can function as a cognitive cue. “When I am in a restaurant looking at the menu, I will choose a low-fat entrée.” Because a strong memory trace is established through much rehearsal of this implementation intention, the thought of ordering low-fat food occurs “automatically” when looking at the menu in a restaurant. This increases the likelihood that the behavior will follow the thought.

Whether environmental or cognitive, replacing cues for unhealthy behaviors with cues for healthy behaviors is a useful strategy for lifestyle change and maintenance. The goal is to take advantage of the influence of automaticity.

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