



Tips for Behavior Change

"But I just don't know what to do. Nothing works!"

We all work hard to ensure that we elicit solutions from our First Breath and My Baby & Me participants, as opposed to simply providing answers, but there will come a time when a woman is genuinely unsure of where to begin with her behavior change. When you find yourself in this situation, it can be tempting to suggest some of the basic "go to" ideas that are commonly given to people making such changes. "Chew gum." "Go for a walk." "Drink water." These ideas are well intended, but they are likely not anything new to your frustrated participant.

If you find yourself in the situation where your participant genuinely has no idea where to begin, first ask for permission to share some ideas with her. If she says yes, here are a few suggestions for changes to make that are based on years of research into behavior change.

Replace the Behavior

When someone is attempting to remove tobacco or alcohol from their life, they typically look at it as quitting or stopping a behavior. A more effective approach is to look at replacing the behavior. The reason this approach works is due to the way that we form habits. A habit is comprised of a cue and a responding action. For example, a cue to smoke could be getting in your car. The responding action is to pull out a pack of cigarettes, roll down the window a couple inches and light up. Over time, your brain builds up an association between the cue and the corresponding action, and it becomes increasingly difficult to encounter the cue (getting in the car), without doing the action (smoking). This is particularly true with addictive substances like tobacco and alcohol. As these substances release dopamine into the brain, these associations between cue and action grow even stronger.

For the most part, people will not be able to avoid all of the cues associated with tobacco or alcohol, so they need to create a new habit to replace the problem behavior. Instead of reaching for the cigarettes, a woman could pop a piece of gum and put on a specific CD. It will take a considerable effort at first, particularly with something as addictive as tobacco. But over time the brain can be retrained to understand that a new action should occur when the cue is encountered.

Build in Accountability

Part of the reason that so many New Year's Resolutions fail is that people try to accomplish them quietly, on their own. We are afraid of failing at a goal in front of others, because public failure is uncomfortable. We can use this fear to help make behavior change more successful. When someone is making a change like quitting drinking, they should announce it to as many people, as publicly as possible (Facebook works well for this). This adds discomfort, which adds a strong disincentive to failure, increasing the chances of success.

In addition to making a behavior change public, we can also tap close friends or family to help us succeed by personally holding us accountable. They should make a regular check in regarding progress and setbacks. This works in the same way as a public announcement, however it can be even more effective, as it involves more one-on-one attention.



Add Stakes

Many times, it's easy to slip up on a behavior change because we don't feel like we have anything to lose if we slip up. Adding stakes changes this. An easy way to do this with regards to tobacco use is to take the money saved from quitting/cutting back and apply it towards a goal. A half-pack per day smoker is spending between twenty and thirty dollars per week on their addiction. Have your participant pick something they really want but would never buy themselves in that range, and make it their prize for making it one week smoke free. Do the same thing for week two, and then double the prize when they make it a month without smoking.

Always Have a Contingency Plan

Many times when we make a plan to change a behavior, we imagine only the perfect scenarios. How we will tackle the change in a stress free, temptation free environment. We forget that life is full of unpredictable situations, and that these situations are going to make behavior change more difficult. When we help our participants plan their behavior change, we should talk about what they will do in unpredictable situations, to help them set up a backup plan. The backup plan doesn't have to be fool-proof, but it should exist as a safety net. Having this "fall back plan" to help them make progress can help a participant approach a behavior change with more confidence, which will make them more successful. The [Action Plan](#) worksheet is a great place to record these plans.

Avoid Temptation by Planning Ahead

When changing a behavior, your participants can increase their chances of success by making decisions in advance in order to avoid temptation. If your participant knows they always smoke while driving, they should make sure they don't have access to their cigarettes in the car. By putting them in the trunk, or leaving them at home, they make the decision in advance that they will not smoke while driving. Taking steps to actively make a behavior more difficult is a great way to increase success. This can be taken even one step further by simply giving up control of decision making altogether. For a tobacco user, this could mean giving their pack to a friend or family member with strict instructions to only give them a specific number per day. For those trying to stop using alcohol, they could give their money or ID to a friend to hold for the night, so that they aren't tempted to buy themselves something to drink.