

Achieving behavioural change

Why is it difficult to change our everyday behaviour based on goals and (medical) recommendations and how to go about it

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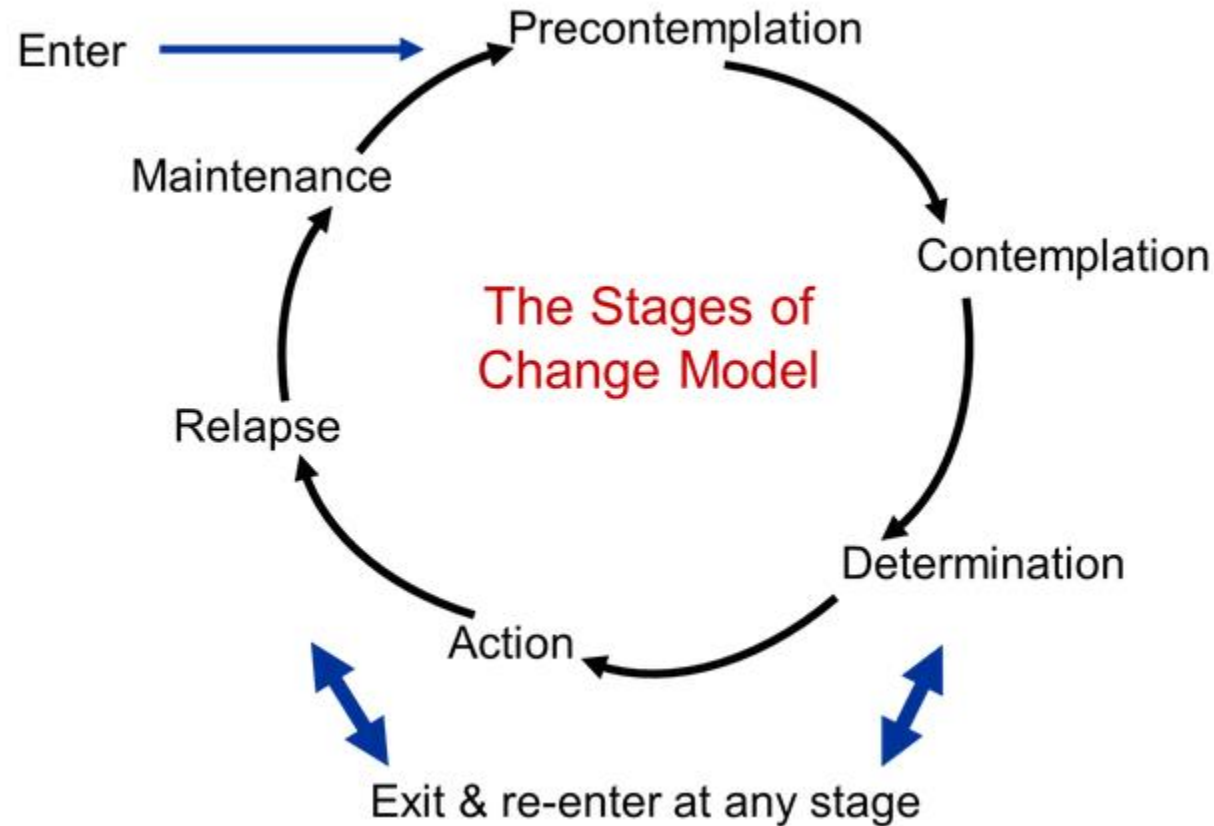
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- 2. I tried to change this behaviour of mine but failed (or have been failing repeatedly).** – How do I deal with these failures mentally? What kind of self-talk is associated with it? At which point? Do I feel stressed about the failures? How do I deal with that stress?
- 3. I tried to change this behaviour of mine and succeeded.** – What are your mental reactions to people who were unable to achieve this change (yet)? What feelings and thoughts emerge spontaneously? Are they any different from the way you start thinking about these people when you try to look at their situation more closely and thoughtfully?
- 4. I was able to change this behaviour for a long period of time but then I came back to my old ways.** – What do you think made you go back to your old behavioural patterns? What helped you achieve the change, and what might have caused the relapse?

WANT TO DO ≠ CAN DO



According to Schwarzer's **HAPA model** (Health Action Process Approach), being motivated (e.g., as a result of persuasion) is NOT ENOUGH; one needs to be able to translate the goal representation into action! **Long-term goal achievement is a proactive rather than reactive process.**

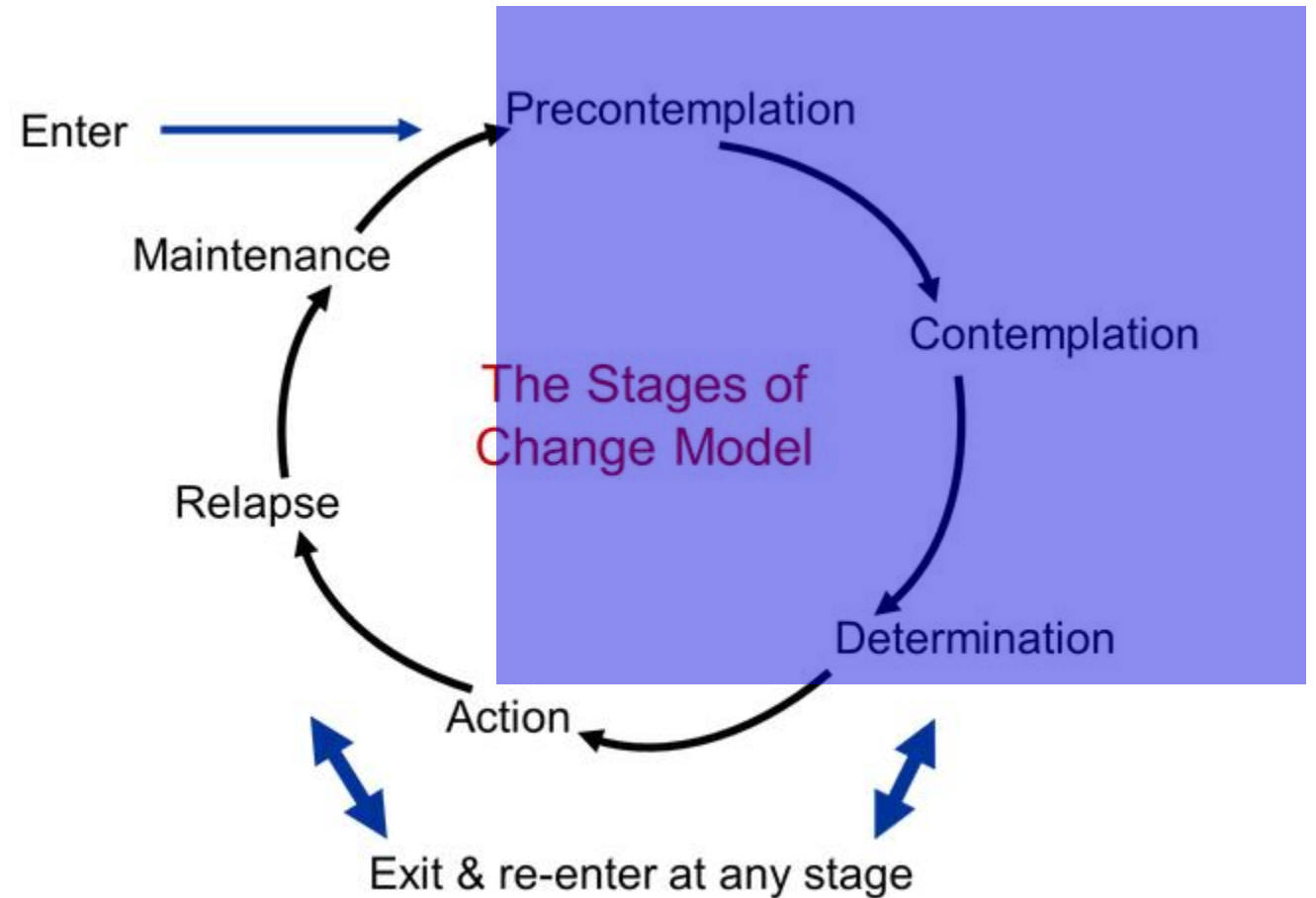
Transtheoretical model of change



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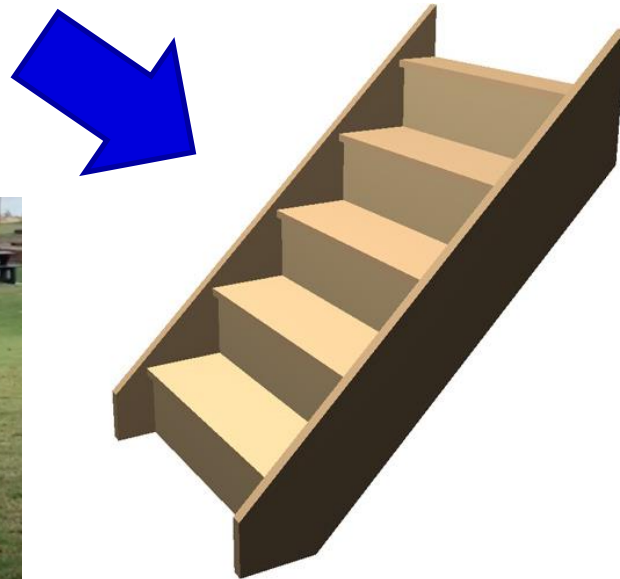
Which is better: focusing on the downsides of the present state or focusing on the benefits of the positive change?

Is stronger motivation always more beneficial (more “activating”)?



Coming up with an effective plan

1. **Evaluating possibilities** – how much can I do? When and how exactly can I do? Which activities can I replace? How can I fit different activities together?
2. **Mental contrasting** – What do I want to achieve, and which steps need to be done to do it? **SMART approach** (“step by step” goal achievement).



Elements of promoting change

- **Consciousness Raising** - Increasing awareness about the healthy behavior.
- **Dramatic Relief** - Emotional arousal about the health behavior, whether positive or negative arousal.
- **Self-Reevaluation** - Self reappraisal to realize the healthy behavior is part of who they want to be.
- **Environmental Reevaluation** - Social reappraisal to realize how their unhealthy behavior affects others.
- **Social Liberation** - Environmental opportunities that exist to show society is supportive of the healthy behavior.
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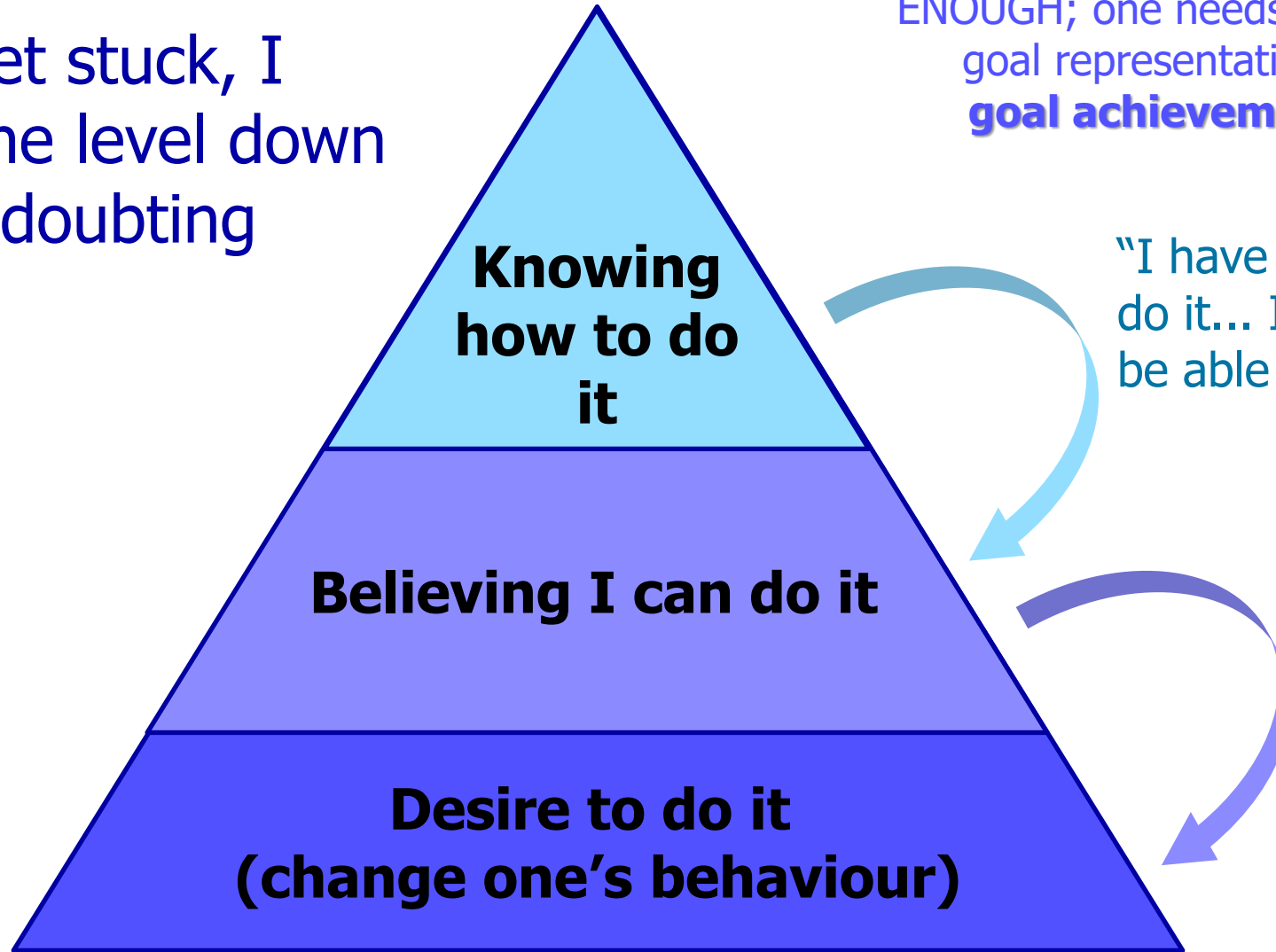
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3. **Self-motivation and adjusting environment** – What might help increase my interest, joy and engagement? How can I make it easier to start/continue and resist the urge to postpone/give up? („*nudging*“) Which obstacles and distractions are better removed?
4. **Timing** – time schedule with specific points in time marking when to start with the activity („implementation intention“)

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When I get stuck, I can fall one level down and start doubting myself...



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"I have no idea how to do it... I don't think I'll be able to do it..."

"Since I'm unable to do it, why should I torture myself? I'll just leave it be..."

Possible goal devaluation through various consequences of **cognitive dissonance**

When ego (self-esteem) goes first: Psychological defence mechanisms

- Denial
- Rationalization
- Intellectualization
- Suppression
- Repression
- Projection
- Displacement
- Acting out
- Aim inhibition
- Avoidance
- Altruism
- Passive aggression
- Compensation
- Undoing
- Dissociation
- Fantasy
- Humour
- Reaction formation
- Sublimation
- Regression

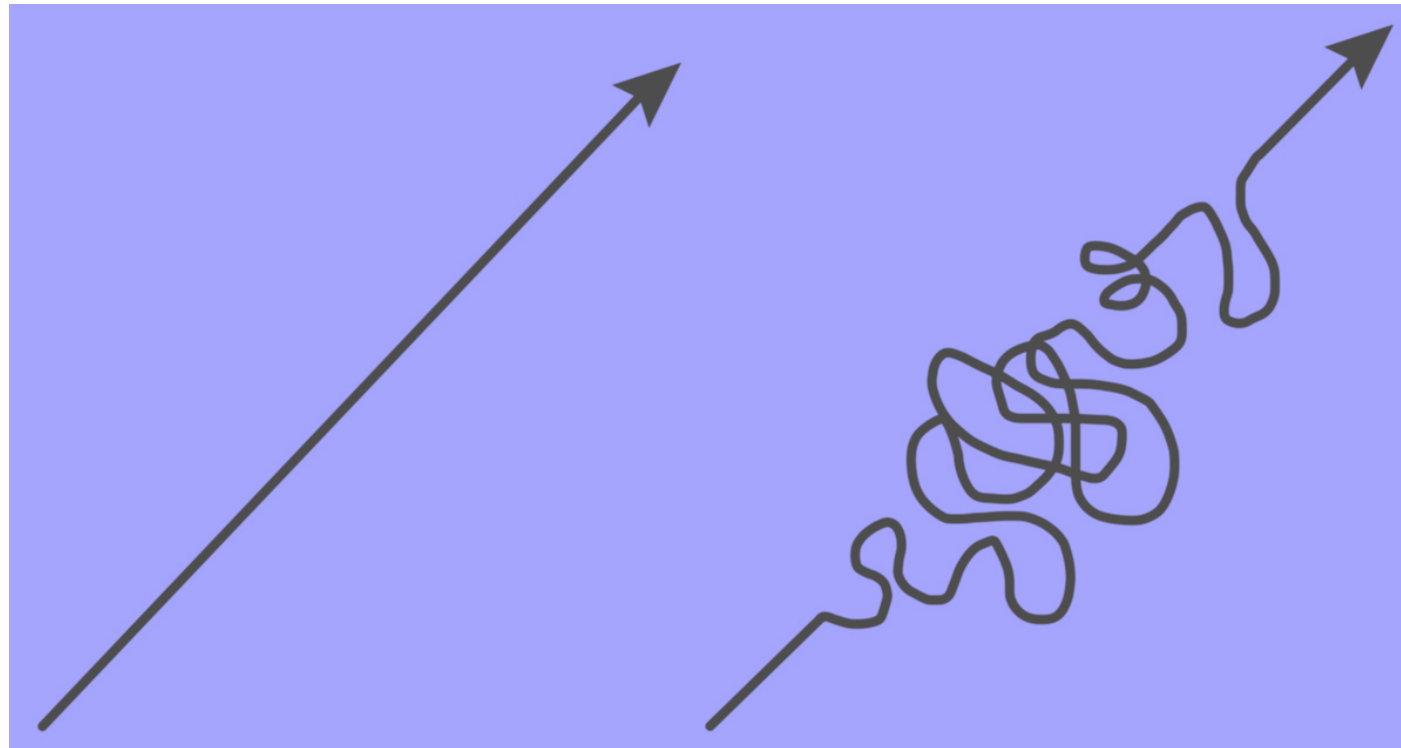
**RATHER THAN
ABILITY OR SHEER
REFLECTION OF
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A CONSTRUCTIVE APPROACH: PROGRESS IS NOT LINEAR!

The main predictor of a successful long-term behavioural change is **persistence in the face of setbacks and failures and ability to learn from mistakes.**

A self-deprecating and judgmental attitude is not helping.



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Why people do not follow lifestyle recommendations

- Perceived (and possibly legitimate) physical, economic, organizational etc. obstacles
- Different kinds of old **habits**, usually acquired in childhood
- **Giving up**, accepting the old ways (“it is **normal** to have these kinds of health issues at this age”)
- **Doubts** about effectiveness: “Does it really work?”; unaware of new advancements
- Lack of information about the effects of prevention; **false beliefs** and unreliable sources of information; lack of understanding of probability and multicausality
- **Being overwhelmed** by the variety of unfamiliar, sometimes commercially competing products, services, and related information
- Association with upper-class lifestyle or with particular groups – does not **self-identify** with it; seen as unusual
- **Lack of skill and knowledge** regarding how to use implement the recommendations properly
- Can't fit into **daily schedule** – other priorities
- **Discomfort** (pain, clumsiness, bad initial choices...)
- **Unhealthy behaviours as an avoidant coping strategy** – lack of more effective strategies

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**How to break
a bad habit?**

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF BEHAVIOUR

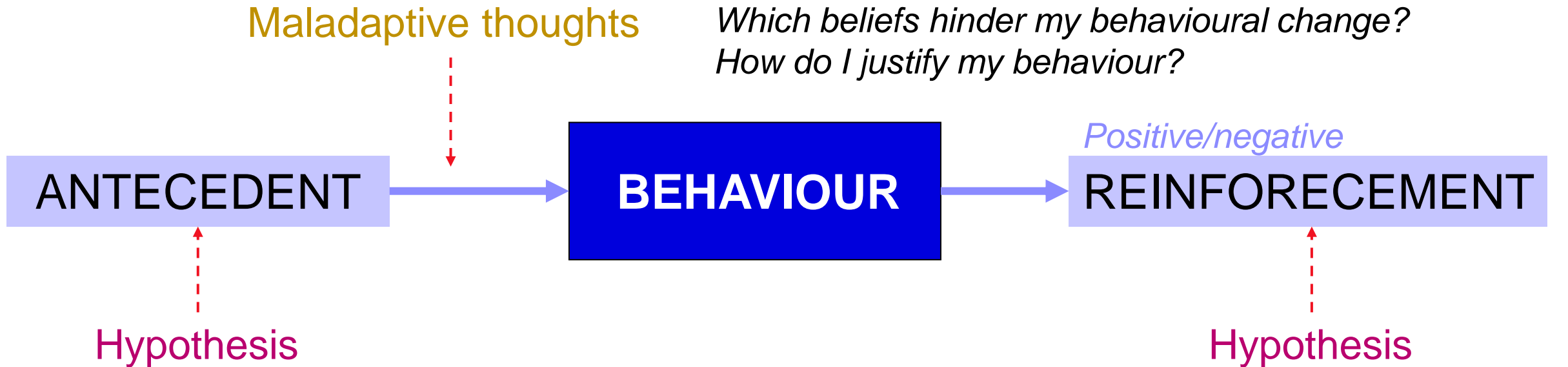


When and where is the behaviour triggered? In which circumstances exactly is it NOT triggered?

What does the behaviour look like? How does it proceed? Is it a single action of a chain of actions? What exactly do I want to change?

What is the outcome of the behaviour? What makes it pleasurable? Which need is satisfied through the behaviour and how?

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What do I have to do to...

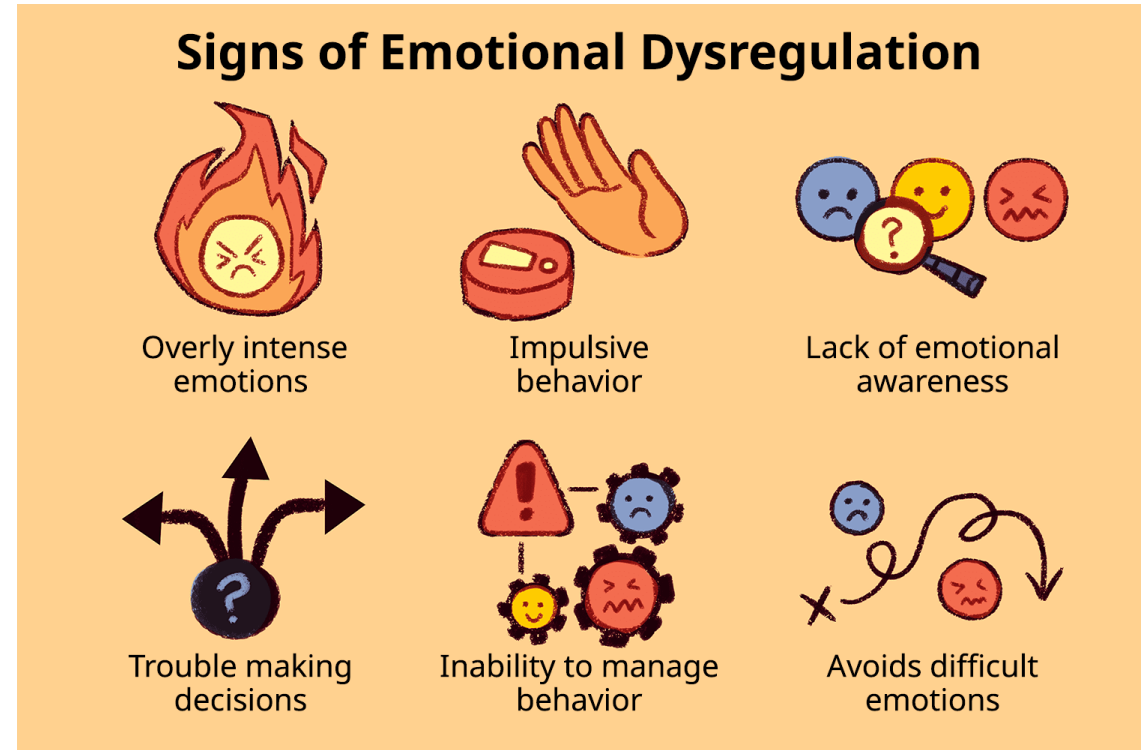
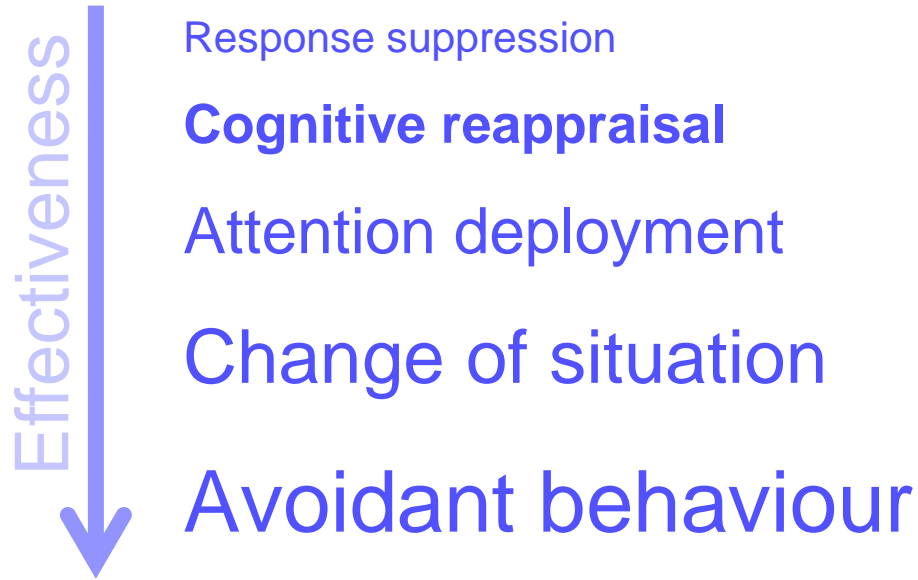
- ...improve my physical fitness?
- ...lose weight in a healthy way?
- ...eat healthier in the long term?
- ...improve my sleep habits?
- ...stop smoking?
- ...reduce alcohol intake?
- ...reduce stress?
- ...see a doctor for a checkup / an examination when I feel something is wrong?
- ...make an appointment with a mental health professional?

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON OBSTACLES?

Breaking an undesirable habit

- Change environment and **avoid triggers**
- **Deliberate practicing of a new behaviour** in response to the trigger or when dealing with situations that lead me to the trigger – should be similar but healthier (desirable) – the new behaviour should be motivating enough to shift our focus to perfecting that new behaviour rather than simply doing it to remove the unwanted behaviour (the “Pink Elephant Effect”)
- Punishing the unwanted behaviour can help but often causes distress and might be hard to arrange (either depends on our willpower, or is out of our control)
- Deliberate **planning and structuring** of behaviour; practicing **mindfulness** in everyday situations (= noticing what is happening inside and outside)
- Developing **new, more effective emotion regulation strategies**
- Revise and supplement my set of **coping strategies** in general (bad habits are often developed as short-term, inefficient coping mechanisms and are also triggered in situations of increased stress)

Emotion regulation



How effective and feasible each strategy is depends on circumstances. However, people often employ coping strategies that are most easily **available** to them rather than those that are most adequate for that particular purpose.

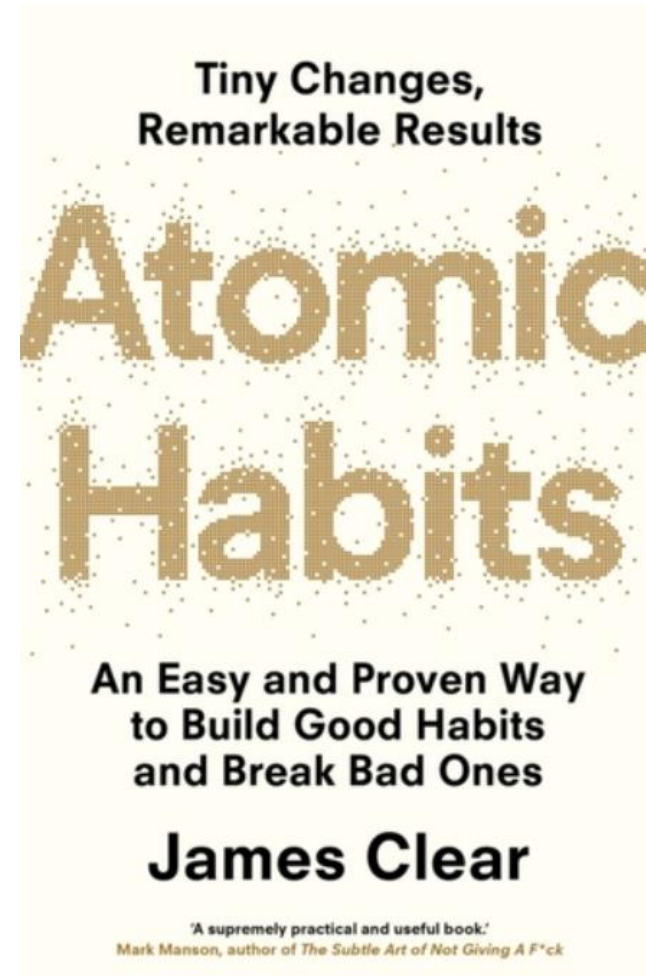
AVAILABILITY = what I am used to; what I know. People will not do something they have not learned (= have never encountered; are prejudiced about...)

Emotion regulation skills – at different levels of specificity – can be trained.

Building new intentional habits

(J. Clear: *Atomic Habits*)

- Cue: *“Make it obvious.”*
- Craving: *“Make it attractive.”*
- Response: *“Make it easy.”*
- Reward: *“Make it satisfying.”*



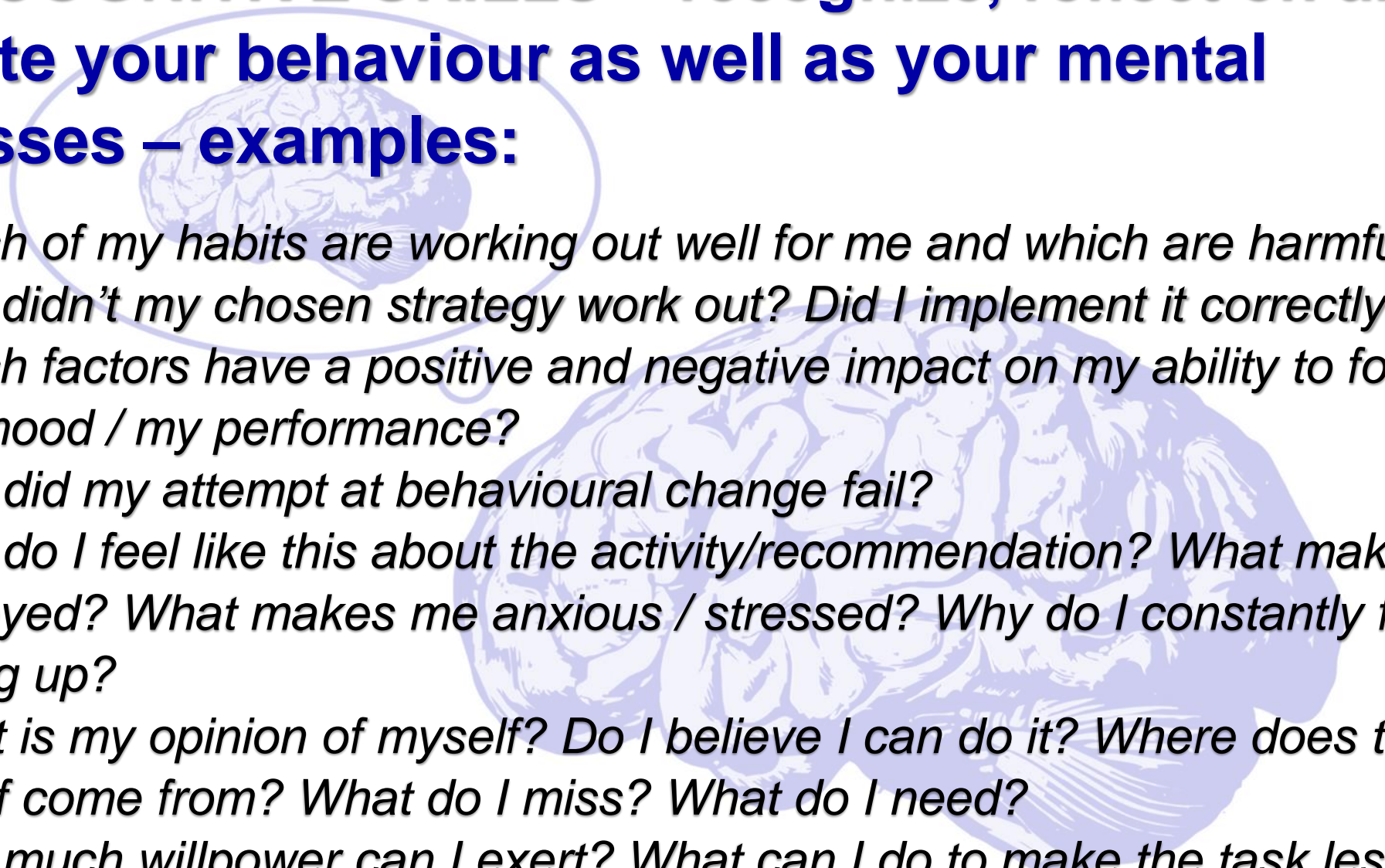
HOW TO BUILD A NEW HABIT

- **Regularity** – determine time intervals you want to maintain
- Determine the **lead behaviour** that will start the sequence (clear and simple, easy to do) – this is your “core habitual behaviour”
- Find an effective key **habit trigger** to match the time intervals you decided on – unambiguously connected to other activities (“When do I start?”; setting **implementation intentions**)
- Making implementation easier – **minimize disruption of daily routine**
- Making remembering easy – “**nudges**” and accessibility – triggers and tools are easy to see and reach
- **Rewarding feeling** (self-praise; rewarding sense of achievement, control and pride); maybe occasional (healthy) external reward
- **Do NOT give up** if you fail from time to time! (“Do not miss twice” rule)
- Exposure to positive **role models** (inspiration and conformity)

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4. **Timing** – time schedule with specific points in time marking when to start with the activity („implementation intention“) → **habit**
5. **Progress monitoring and positive feedback** – what has worked and what has not; acknowledgement of “hidden” progress (learning from setbacks)
6. **Constructive emotion regulation** – e.g. cognitive reappraisal – viewing difficulties as challenge, learning opportunities, path to progress; developing self-regulation as a new set of skills...

METACOGNITIVE SKILLS = recognize, reflect on and regulate your behaviour as well as your mental processes – examples:



- *Which of my habits are working out well for me and which are harmful?*
- *Why didn't my chosen strategy work out? Did I implement it correctly?*
- *Which factors have a positive and negative impact on my ability to focus / my mood / my performance?*
- *Why did my attempt at behavioural change fail?*
- *Why do I feel like this about the activity/recommendation? What makes me annoyed? What makes me anxious / stressed? Why do I constantly feel like giving up?*
- *What is my opinion of myself? Do I believe I can do it? Where does the belief come from? What do I miss? What do I need?*
- *How much willpower can I exert? What can I do to make the task less dependent on willpower (more enjoyable, more habitual...)?*

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Thank you!