

THE DAILY NEWS
Texas' Oldest Newspaper
<http://galvestondailynews.com>

Copyright © 2005 The Galveston County Daily News

Self-discipline a learned trait, experts say

By Laura Elder

Published December 26, 2004

You know the type: The gym-chiseled co-worker who can breeze past a box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts; the friend who runs three miles a day, rain or shine; the sister-in-law who actually eats five servings of vegetables a day.

While millions of people next week will make New Year's resolutions to become healthier or get the body they've always dreamed of, only a small percentage will meet their goals.

Is self-discipline something we're born with?

No, say experts. Self-discipline is something that's learned and within everyone's reach. Self-discipline comes from the way people see themselves, their general attitudes, their subconscious thoughts and behaviors they learned very young, experts say.

"About 5 percent of the population has the 'it,' or the ability to seemingly accomplish anything they set out to do; for these people change is a relative snap," said John McGrail, a clinical hypnotherapist and performance coach in Los Angeles. "The rest of the population has problems, get stuck."

Humans, McGrail said, are genetically hard-wired to resist change.

Even illness — diabetes, hypertension, heart disease — or the threat of death isn't impetus enough for some people to break bad habits. And, McGrail said, willpower is almost never enough.

"The phenomenon is known as homeostasis, the tendency to

maintain the behavioral status quo, even when it means misery," McGrail said. "To overcome homeostasis, we have to re-teach our brain to respond in the ways we choose rather than by our old, familiar, known and very automatic patterns."

Changing Minds

A mind programmed to follow certain patterns is difficult to change, McGrail said. The key, he said, is working with the subconscious.

Not ready to undergo hypnosis? When changing basic beliefs, McGrail suggests that anyone trying to change a bad habit or their behavior recite positive affirmations just before they go to sleep and just after they wake up in the morning.

"That's when your subconscious is in a very receptive state," he said.

Bob Losyk, trainer, motivational speaker and author of "Get a Grip: Overcoming Stress and Thriving in the Workplace," said a combination of heredity, upbringing, culture, family and education make people the way they are.

Losyk said he believes a small percentage of people are genetically inclined to be obese, but most are the way they are because of learned behavior.

What's the difference between someone who has self-control and a couch potato? "The winners do all the things losers don't want to do," Losyk said.

What We Say

Losyk also asserts that people can change their behavior if they change their subconscious.

"We become what we say," Losyk said. "You can fool your subconscious into believing anything just in the half hour before you go to bed and half hour after you wake up; you can retrain your brain."

Losyk suggests that people who want to stay on track with exercise constantly pump themselves up with positive

thoughts.

"Just before you go to bed, tell yourself, 'I can do this; I can lose the weight; I will not fail,'" he said.

Blame It On Mom?

Like it or not, people learn about self-discipline from their parents or other models at a very young age, said James Campbell Quick, a psychologist and professor at the University of Texas at Arlington. Overly indulgent parents can be an obstacle to children's ability to manage their lives in healthy ways later on, said Campbell, who is the John and Judy Goolsby Distinguished Professor at the Goolsby Leadership Academy at the university.

"Developing self-discipline isn't natural; that's why the Old Testament was written first," Quick said. "They're 10 commandments, not 10 suggestions."

Children form strong patterns in the first 10 years of life, Quick said. And they learn about healthy eating and exercise from observing their parents.

"If kids put things together in their mind in a really flawed way, their logic can be flawed and their understanding of behavior and consequence can be flawed."

Restraining Force

"Parents should act as a restraining force until a child can self-discipline," he said. "Letting children do whatever they want is not healthy."

But does that mean adults who learned bad habits as children are forever doomed to repeat negative behaviors?

People can and do change, Quick said. He recommends that anyone trying to break a bad habit identify a positive role model they want to emulate.

"They should establish a relationship with that person and learn how that person did what they did," he said.

Beware Of Vampires

The most striking trait among people who meet their health and fitness goals and master self-discipline is the ability to practice positive thinking, said Judith Orloff, a psychiatrist, clinical faculty member at UCLA and author of "Positive Energy."

"In order to change negative habits, you have to have positive thoughts about what you can do," Orloff said. "You have to positively affirm that this is going to be a wonderful year and say, 'I can do this,' as opposed to thinking about last year and what you didn't do. "

Someone whose inner mantra is "I'm fat and I'm never going to do this," will rarely succeed in developing an exercise routine, she said.

But people who tell themselves, "I am a beautiful person and I'm doing something good for myself is on the right path," Orloff said.

But changing negative thinking also means warding off people Orloff calls "energy vampires." Energy vampires, she said, "suck the life force right out of you."

Body Transformation

Anyone trying to lose weight or start an exercise program should stay away from the vampires, she said.

"It's very important that you surround yourself with positive people to support you, as opposed to someone who says, 'You'll never lose 20 pounds,'" Orloff said.

People who are successful at maintaining self-control set realistic goals and don't seek quick fixes, said Texas City resident Frances McBride, a personal trainer.

"People get this idea that they're going to go on a diet, lose weight and look good," said McBride, 35. "It's not about that. It's about long-term change. If you go back to doing the things you were doing before, it's not going to work."

Several years ago, McBride, who worked in the medical field, was unhappy with the way she felt. She was diagnosed with

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, a problem traditional medical treatments didn't solve, she said.

McBride, who already was exercising, decided to change the way she ate, cutting out refined foods and eating whole foods.

Seeing results is the best motivator to maintain self-discipline, she said.

"I went through a total body transformation," she said. "When you realize you're actually in control of healing your own body and that your choices make you better or make you sick, it motivates you to make it a daily part of your life."

'All Mental'

McBride also is a proponent of positive thinking. "It's all mental," she said. "You are what you think you are."

Robyn Bushong, an island resident and small-business owner, is known for arriving at the Galveston Racquet Club at 4:30 a.m. most mornings. When she isn't teaching a spinning class — an exercise program on stationary bikes — she's attending other fitness classes or working out on the cardiovascular training machines.

'Not Magic'

But Bushong, 57, said that while she's always been organized and motivated, for years she struggled with a weight problem.

Experts say that those who succeed with health and fitness often seek help and understand why they do the things they do.

Bushong agrees. As a child, she was rewarded with food, she said.

"When I did well in school, I was rewarded with a grilled cheese sandwich and a Cherry Coke," she said. "I grew up in the 1950s when you didn't think about the quality of eating."

Bushong said her life changed after she spent two weeks at

the Cooper Clinic in Dallas, at the 30-acre Cooper Aerobics Center. Founded in 1970, the center provides health and wellness information to people, corporations and organizations. The program also focuses on achieving emotional balance.

Bushong said she ate when she was under stress. The Cooper program, she said, taught her to eat properly, even when she traveled. Self-discipline isn't about perfection, she said. People often fail when they believe they have to give up something completely or when they take an all-or-nothing approach.

"They (Cooper program instructors) tell you to eat healthy 80 percent of the time, 20 percent of the time, do what you want," Bushong said. "It's not magic, it's common sense."

Past failures can make some people hopeless and even cynical, said Lee Jampolsky, a clinical psychologist and author of "Walking Through Walls."

"They look at other people with good habits, and it seems out of reach; sometimes they resent it," Jampolsky said. "Nobody is successful in what they do if they're hopeless."

Jampolsky also suggests that people banish negative thoughts about themselves.

"If we look at the language we use inside our minds, it determines whether or not we are successful," he said. "We need to look carefully where we put the word 'impossible.'"

Breaking Barriers

A few years ago, Jampolsky lost 95 percent of his hearing because of an autoimmune disorder, yet still achieved his career goals.

Jampolsky points to runner Roger Bannister, who in 1954 in Oxford, broke the four-minute mile barrier. Before that, most people didn't think it was possible.

"Somewhere in his thinking he believed it was actually possible," said Jampolsky. "The next year, six other people broke the four-minute mile. It wasn't because they came out

with Nike Air-Soles; he changed what people saw as possible."