

## Making Time for Health

***Learn why it is so important to plan in advance for your health success!***

By Douglas Lisle, Ph.D.

When it comes to healthful living, knowing what to do isn't always enough! Translating good intentions into good behavior can be hard to do. One of the biggest obstacles to healthful living is the problem psychologists refer to as "channel factors."

To understand what is meant by "channel factors," think about how water runs down the side of a mountain. It "channels" itself into the path of least resistance, doesn't it? Even minor obstacles, such as a small rock in the path, can "channel" the water into a different direction. Psychologists have noticed something similar in human behavior.

Behavior has a strong tendency to be channeled into paths of least resistance. In fact, studies have shown that often seemingly minor situational factors or obstacles are actually major determinants of what people do in real life. This is a very important lesson for those of us who are pursuing better health. We must pay attention to these "channel" factors because they can dramatically influence whether or not we actually engage in health-promoting behavior that we know is so important.

### **A surprising study**

Psychologists John Darley and C. Bateson decided to investigate this "little factors are important" aspect of channel factors in a study on helping behavior. They based their study on the parable of the "Good Samaritan," using young seminary students at the Princeton Theological Seminary as subjects. The students were perfect

subjects because in class they had been studying the parable of the Good Samaritan, a man who stops to help a stranger in distress.

Here is how the study worked. Students were called in - one by one - by the experimenter. Each student, in turn, was told that he was to give a brief talk in a nearby building on the Good Samaritan parable. What the students didn't know was that they were secretly being divided into two experimental groups.

### **Seminarians on the run**

When a student from the first group was called in to the experimenter, he was told, "It will be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head on over."

When a student from the second group was called in to the experimenter, he was told, "You're late; they were expecting you a few minutes ago, so you'd better hurry." Except for these two different comments about how much time they had, the instructions were exactly the same for all of the students.

On the way to the other building, each of the students came upon a man slumped in a doorway, head down, coughing and groaning...clearly in need of assistance. What do you think happened?

Of the students who were told that they had "plenty of time," 63% stopped to offer assistance. Only 10% of the students who were told they "were late" stopped to help, and some of them even stepped over the body of the person who was "in their way"!

This study demonstrates that "niceness" was not the primary determining factor in whether or not assistance was offered. The main determining factor was a channel factor, a subtle situational factor - "you have plenty of time" vs. "you are late" - that largely influenced whether or not the needed helpful behavior actually took place. The seminarians who "were late" would have been six times more likely to stop if they only "had more time."

## Making the time for health

When assisting people in making the transition to healthful living, the most frequent problem I hear is frustration with what I call "convenience factors." At the Center for Conservative Therapy and at our Health Promotion Clinic, I conduct group therapy workshops to assist people in planning successful lifestyles.

Among the issues on which we focus our attention and take very seriously are these subtle situational channel factors. We have found that if people don't get themselves organized, they simply "won't have time" to live healthfully, and we all know where that leads. Some of the strategies we utilize are discussed below.

## Some helpful strategies

One key strategy to eating more whole natural foods is to make sure that an abundance is available! People have a natural tendency to not want to waste food, and whole natural foods will eventually "go bad" if not eaten.

That is why so many people in the world are eating mostly processed foods - because these foods are convenient and are rarely "wasted." If you look on some cereal boxes, the manufacturers suggest that the food is so well preserved (with chemicals) that it will be good for a couple of years!

One "channel factor" issue to work in your favor is to have an abundance of whole natural foods in the house. If you have to run to the store every time you want to make a healthful meal, the "channel factors" will very often defeat you.

That is why it is so important to keep plenty of healthful food in the house, even if it means you buy too much at first and you have to throw some away. You may feel uncomfortable throwing food away, but until you get adept at buying the right amount, it is just part of the price of healthful living.

Some of our patients get hungry in the car, and the ease of pulling into a fast-food driveway to

satisfy their hunger is just too easy, relative to the hassle of ferreting out a healthy meal or snack. Once again, planning ahead for these moments can really improve your health habits.

Keep a small cooler or other container in the car, with some healthy snacks tucked away. Some of those snacks might be apples, oranges, cashews, or cold baked potatoes or yams. (For those of you who eat Sunrider foods there are many different foods and snack always available).

The weekly menu plan we make available can be helpful. If you have a corresponding shopping list ready, it can make your week sail along, meal after healthful meal, according to a preset schedule.

Of course, if you want to deviate from the schedule, feel free! But the idea is that the more habitual we make good habits, the easier they are to follow, and the more often healthy behaviors will result. If you are planning and shopping every few days, with everything different, the decisions and hassles can become channel factors, and then it can get easier to "slip."

## Finding your own way

The above suggestions aren't meant to be prescriptions for how you should do things. Everyone needs to find his or her own way. But if you are having trouble staying on track, these kinds of ideas might well be worth a try. If you are "slipping" a lot, it may be partly because of some subtle situational factors. And getting more control of these "channel factors" can sometimes make the difference between success and failure.

Talk to the **START** area coordinator to help you plan your meals better.

### WARNING:

The Information in these articles are not intended to replace medical advice or treatment. Questions about symptoms, specific dietary needs and medications, general or specific, should be discussed with your physician. The information in this article is for informational purposes only, and is not medical advice or a substitute for a physician's consultation and/or examination.

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