

Inch by Inch: Microactions

By Mary LoVerde

Everyone wants to make changes, but most of us are already up to our armpits in change. How could more of it possible help? Say the C word and an invisible barrier pops up that often prevents us from doing what we really want to do. Microactions can ease our resistance.

Microactions are teeny tiny steps that propel us forward without threatening our sense of control. They get around our fears because we commit to something so little we could hardly be afraid and we're guaranteed success. They're much smaller than steps and often so ridiculous that we outfox our resistance to change.

I first learned about the power of microactions when I used the concept to help my patients make dramatic alterations in their lifestyles. As the director of the Hypertension Research Center at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center I prescribed exercise for all my patients who wanted to lose weight. I remember one woman who hated to exercise. I honestly think she would rather wire her jaws shut or eat a strict diet of earthworms. At each visit I instructed her to walk for thirty minutes each day and at each return visit she confessed she had not exercised at all. We tried every behavior modification trick in the book, but no amount of punishment or reward could get her to comply.

So I tried a microaction. I asked her if she could simply *get dressed* to exercise three times a week. She looked at me as though I was radioactive. "What a worthless thing to do! Let me get this straight. I am supposed to just get dressed to exercise? A sweat shirt will not burn any calories!"

I agreed but replied, "Just this week. Humor me."

At her next visit I asked her if she had tried the "just get dressed" prescription.

“Yes I did.”

“Great!. Now I want you to add one minute of walking,,,”

She interrupted me with a crafty grin. “I walked for thirty minutes three times this week.”

“But I gave you strict instructions not to.”

She laughed. “I felt so stupid standing there, all dressed up with no place to go, that I decided to walk just a little. Five blocks from home I discovered that exercise is not so bad. My neighbor joined me and now between the verbal venting and the hiking I come back feeling wonderful.”

What do you want to change? Whether it is getting more organized at work or cutting back on eating potato chips, think of the tiniest microactions and give it a whirl. You may find yourself moving from “gonna do” to “follow through.”

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