



Episode 1

## The Force of Habit

Hello and welcome to the inaugural Episode 1 of Soundbites powered by the AbbVie Care program, bringing you the most up-to-date health and lifestyle advice.

I'm your host, **Aaron Sihota**, a pharmacist from Vancouver, BC, and I work very closely with specialists in the rheumatology and dermatology community as well as being Clinical Faculty at the University of British Columbia. Soundbites is inspired by 15 years of learning from thousands of AbbVie Care program members and is one of a kind in the Canadian space.

Oprah Winfrey once said, "Step out of the history that is holding you back. Step into the new story you are willing to create."

In today's podcast, we'll be talking about change; why it's so hard and how to make it through the messy phase to start enjoying the potential benefits that may wait for us on the other side. Sometimes we don't think of starting to eat healthy, an exercise routine or a new medication as change, but it is. Change can be anything that disrupts our regular routine.

Implementing or starting a new routine takes a great deal of practice and mental strength. Regardless of how excited you are about the new healthy lifestyle you promised yourself on New Year's Eve, it's one thing to decide on a change, but it's another to stick with it. Mark Twain described it perfectly when he said that quitting smoking wasn't difficult in the slightest – he said he had done it hundreds of times! So take heart, you're in good company!

Sometimes we need change because we're unhappy with the way things are; maybe your health is diminishing due to bad habits, like eating poorly, lack of activity or smoking. Or perhaps a desire to change stems from the hope of what could be; you've always dreamed of playing the guitar or you want to be more successful in some other area of your life. The good news is that you do possess more power over yourself than you think. And the more you understand how new habits work, the more power you'll have over the things you do each day. After all, we are the sum of our daily actions, so forming better habits is an effective way to improve our lives and create a difference we can feel and see.

We are creatures of habit, so how do we make that work for us instead of against us? It helps to understand how it works.

The habit loop is a well-known cycle that we engage in involuntarily, and there are 3 parts; the trigger, the action and the reward. Our mind receives the trigger, which motivates a response or action, which provides a reward. Over time, our mind begins to associate the three together and the cycle starts all over again. For example, when we see the coffee machine (a trigger), it reminds us to take our medication (an action) and then we have a relaxing cup of coffee (the reward). That cycle forms a neurological loop in our minds and that is how the habit gets formed. When a habit is formed, our brain begins to function automatically. The mind moves away from the decision-making process in order to focus energy on the actions that are less predictable. The only way to get to that point is consistency. The stricter your routine is the better. For example, how often do you wake up and start the coffee machine without even thinking about it? Or drive to work and you have no idea how you actually got there.

So think of something right now that you would like to either change, add or remove from your life. Now, making that decision is a big deal because this change journey has to start with a strong intention. It's a change that you want to make because it's important to you. But don't pat yourself on the back just yet. Even the best of us give up before we've even had the chance to see any results. So there are a few tricks that can get you over that hump and help you with your change for good.

Having some tips and tricks to help you maintain your change is important. Let's break it down with 4 little hacks that will help you stay the course.

## Habit hack #1

### **Honour your progress**

We know that we are likely to maintain behaviours if our new life or the changes we have achieved are simply too good to give up. If you step on the scale several weeks in a row and see that your weight is going down, you know that the new healthy eating or exercise plan is working. If you notice you've improved your mobility, so that you're able to go for longer walks, and you believe it could be connected to taking your medication as prescribed, it is less likely you will do something that interrupts your routine. Any time you come close to not sticking with your behaviour, your inner voice will say "Wait a minute... I don't want to do anything to lose the gains I've made." In other words, you maintain the change because the decision to do otherwise conflicts with things you value.

Track your progress by keeping a journal or using your AbbVie Care tools so you can really see the changes; sometimes the small ones go unnoticed. Make sure you take note of the activities that you are able to do that you couldn't do before. Sometimes changes happen slowly so we take it for granted when we suddenly are able to do things again and we don't stop to celebrate those moments and appreciate how far we've come. Having a way of tracking our progress can be incredibly rewarding and fun. And it can show you what you'd be turning your back on if you decide not to keep going.

## Habit hack #2

### **Beware of the gradual drift**

Rewards are an essential part of the habit loop so it's important that you're rewarding yourself, but it's equally important to be mindful of what could set you off course.

If there's something that triggers you to skip your new habit here and there, it's important to analyze what's going on. Ask yourself why you think it's happening and what you think you could do to avoid these triggers. Maybe you're trying to reduce your sugar intake, but you walk by a bakery every day that wafts the smell of fresh-baked cookies as you walk by – you might want to consider changing your route and replacing your craving with something else. Do whatever you need to do to avoid anything that weakens your will.

Similarly, if you were looking back at the time you skipped your medication, consider the reasons. Maybe it was the wrong time of day, or you were too busy, or your reward was no longer working. Looking back helps you anticipate problems that could arise and get in the way while you establish the new change.

If I asked you, “how likely is it that you are going to maintain the changes you made in taking your medication as your doctor prescribed?”, your estimate is a reasonable predictor. If you answered less than 80% to that question, it is a good time to think about what might be getting in the way of change and consider how you might increase that percentage.

Therefore, change can be like trying to climb to the top of a mountain by taking two steps forward and one step back. Then, when we have achieved a change, we celebrate and think that we are finished, but what actually happens is that we start to move in the opposite direction: two steps back and one step forward. Suddenly we look up and are surprised to find that we are no longer standing at the top of the mountain, we're just back where we started. So pay attention not to gradually drift off course.

## Habit hack #3

### **The Buddy System**

Keep yourself accountable by making a pact with a friend or family member who is also trying to make a positive change in their lives. You'll be able to cheer each other on and also give each other a kick in the butt when needed. When someone's watching us, we always tend to behave a little better. For instance, we tend to make it to the gym more often when we go with someone else!

Leveraging the support of a friend or family member is also very effective in helping you take your medication as your doctor prescribed. For example, if you and your partner participate in the routine together – such as taking your medications while eating breakfast together – you'll be less likely to forget. Regardless of the change you are trying to make, if

you are considering having someone take part in the routine, it's helpful to let them know that they should reinforce your new behaviour, saying "I appreciate you taking care of your health". They should also celebrate your reaching your milestones, and support and encouragement on those days that are more difficult. Less helpful is someone who tells you what you are doing is wrong or focusing on those times when you fell off the wagon. Response like "You missed your dose yesterday. You failed." aren't helpful.

The essential strategy in helping people maintain change is to build your own awareness of why you are doing what you are doing; what were the reasons for starting in the first place? Without a strong "why" it will be hard to maintain your change. From your "why", keep track of anything that could signal a drift away from the change and take steps early to avoid problems. The best way to do that is to use your own wisdom and enlist the help of others who might be able to help you get back on track.

## Habit hack #4

### **If you fall off, get back on!**

Making a change is not a one-time event. Even if we are fully committed, it's something that takes patience and we all know that it's easy to veer off course. If you have been prescribed a new medication, the change hasn't taken place the second you leave the doctor's office. It hasn't even really taken place after a few months of taking the treatment. That's because you're never truly in the clear, even after a period of change has been achieved. Similar to the way that making change is often two steps forward one step back, once we have achieved a change, we often start the process in the opposite direction: two steps back and one step forward. Suddenly, we realize with horror that we're right back where we started from.

It's tiny little exceptions to the rule that are usually to blame. Skipping a few doses, skipping a session here or there, allowing yourself to cheat a little bit because it's a holiday or because you feel you've earned a break. Don't waver from your routine ever! That's rule number one. And if you do slip up, the sooner you get back on the horse the better.

So, let's do a little recap.

**Hack #1** — Honour your progress,

**Hack #2** — Beware the gradual drift,

**Hack #3** — Use the buddy system, and

**Hack #4** — If you fall off, get back on.

Try these tips and don't look back, you'll be thanking yourself later.

And remember to be patient. Change takes time but the potential rewards could be worth the effort. If you've got a new habit that you want to implement the best time to start is now.

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