



## ***Stepping Stones for the Good Life***

#7 March 2012

### **Make It a Habit, Habit, Habit**

From the Desk of Glenda Haskell, *Life Coach*

A review of the recently-released book *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* by Charles Duhigg, a reporter at the New York Times, appears in the March 11, 2012, Sunday Book Review published by the Times. Based on this review and other articles, I'm eager to read the book.

Recently, I drafted the text for a brochure about my life coaching business. In it, I focus on, as I've seen through my coaching, the three key outcomes of hiring a life coach: better habits, improved states of mind, and tangible accomplishments or life changes. In this piece, I've decided to shine the spotlight on habits.

We all have habits—good and bad. What are some of your helpful habits? What are some of your more harmful habits?

In the strengths-based coaching that I do, if a client has decided to focus on creating a new habit that will help him or her to achieve a goal, the first thing I typically do is ask a question such as, "What are the helpful habits you already have in place?" To use a metaphor, I call this the "habit muscle." We all have habit muscle! Zeroing in on where we already flex this muscle is a platform from which we can build upward.

Then, through asking some questions, I invite the person to do some "research" on their own behavior (not that I use these words). What's working well for you? What has let you develop your good habits? Responses I've heard have included these: doing something every day or on some type of regular schedule, focusing on what I stand to gain long-term, telling a friend, and doing the activity even when I don't feel like doing it (not letting my moods control me).

I will then sometimes ask, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how would rank yourself currently with respect to the helpful habits you *do* exercise?" Then I remind the person that the goal is not to leapfrog to the top of the scale but only to move to the next higher level. What can you do to move from a 3 to a 4 or from a 4 to a 5? It's also a good reminder that most people are not at zero but already sit somewhere up on the scale, which makes for a less daunting goal.

The next step is to develop a plan for beginning a new habit (or returning to an old one). Below are five tips for how to increase your chances for success.

**1. Start small.** Better to set the bar low and clear it than to raise it higher and fail to make it over. This also means shining a spotlight on only one habit at a time until it's firmly under your belt. It's easy to get carried away and then end up feeling discouraged or even to give up.

Your goal should be to rack up some small wins and to carefully steer clear of a feeling of failure. To quote from *Change Anything: The New Science of Personal Success* (Kerry Patterson et al), "The biggest risk of not finishing a project is dropping out at the beginning." By starting small and chalking up some small wins, you significantly increase your chances for success.

**2. Paint two mental pictures: toward and away from.** To help motivate yourself, paint a picture in your mind of both the positive results you want to achieve and also where you're likely headed if you don't make any changes. For greater power, imagine how you will feel in either scenario (good and bad).

**3. Keep track.** It's been shown over and over again in studies of human behavior that monitoring our behavior has an effect on that behavior. Did you ever receive gold stars on a chart on the wall when you were a kid? I do. I loved the look of those stars in a row by my name. How could you translate the power of those stars into a tracking system that works for you as an adult?

Do you have any stones or marbles in your house? You could choose a container (e.g., a small basket) into which you would place a stone or marble every time you engage in your new habit--and watch the pile grow. Or you could attach a piece of paper to your refrigerator and add an exclamation point or smiley face every time you take the action you want to turn into a habit. Be creative. Let yourself be a kid again.

**4. Build in accountability and get support.** Go public with a trusted friend or family member—one whom you feel sure will support you in your commitment to adopt the new habit that's your goal. Call or send email or text messages to him or her with progress reports. Best of all, pair up with someone else who wants to make the same kind change you do. Also, reward your progress but in small ways that don't take away from the inherent benefit of the new habit itself, as this could backfire.

**5. Be ready for the almost inevitable step backwards and have a plan.** If something comes up and you miss a day, there are two keys to getting yourself back on course. First, accept yourself completely (neither you nor life are perfect) and then get back on board. A main principle I live by in my coaching work and express often to my clients: *No judgment; we always start from where you are.* Try the technique I described in another *Stepping Stones for the Good Life* gleaned from basketball coach John Calipari. As you run out on the court to get yourself back in the game, call out to yourself, "Next!"