

THRIVING

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How to “Hack” Your Own Brain

Much like a computer responds to commands, your brain can be programmed to accept any changes you might want to make in your life. However, many of your current behaviors stem from unconstructive programming you received as a child that may stand in the way of change.

Dr. Maxwell Maltz, in his book *Psycho-Cybernetics*, published in 1960, says, “Beliefs about ourselves have unconsciously been formed from our past experiences...especially in early childhood.” So keep in mind, when you want to change a particular habit or belief, that the unwanted behavior was built on patterns developed over time.

In this classic book, Dr. Maltz introduced the idea of a mind-body connection and that positive outcomes are achieved through changing our attitudes. Here are some simple steps that can help you overcome self-sabotaging tendencies, much like installing new software into the computer of your mind.

Identify the issue. Write down everything you know about the habit, such as when it started and why. Be as detailed and truthful as possible because it’s hard to change what you don’t acknowledge. And list all the reasons you want to change. According to Dr. Maltz, “Change the self-image and you change the personality.”

Set realistic goals. If you want to lose weight, for instance, simply saying “I want to lose a few pounds” is not enough to bring about lasting change. However, if you state “I will lose 10 pounds before my birthday” then your mind has a distinct path to follow. And make sure your goal is both realistic and attainable so that you set yourself up for success.

Use “creative visualization.” Using your imagination to picture how you want

to behave gives you a huge edge in overcoming unwanted habits, because the subconscious mind sees in images, not words. For example, as you recall what you had for breakfast, do you picture the words “I ate scrambled eggs” or the image of scrambled eggs on a plate? So “see” yourself as having accomplished your goal.

Act “as if” you have achieved your goal. Imagining you have already accomplished your goal goes a long way toward actually achieving it. For instance, someone 10 pounds lighter may exercise more or be more confident, so if you already *act* as if you weigh less, you will automatically start moving more and feeling better about yourself.

Use positive affirmations. Power words or phrases spoken as if you mean it keep you motivated and help you turn negative programming into positive change. And the great news is: according to many experts, including Maltz, it usually takes only 21 days to effect change in our self-concept. So you are just three weeks away from achieving your goal from the day you start!

Reward yourself. Don’t forget to give yourself a pat on the back for every positive step you take towards your new goal. It’s important to reward yourself with something that will make you feel good about yourself and to “imprint” your newly forming positive habit.

According to Maltz, the brain itself is simply a “goal-striving mechanism” that operates very much like a computer. Your mind is the software that makes you uniquely you. Following the steps offered above is a means of “hacking” your brain, changing the programming and creating the life of your dreams. ✱

10 Good Communication Practices

Modern technology has come upon us quickly, with few rules of etiquette. Here are some guidelines for polite and effective communication:

- 1. Email subject line.** Short, catchy and specific will get a quicker response than “following up” or “hi.” Let your readers know the topic.
- 2. Email message.** If business-related, address the person by their name, if you know it.
- 3. Voice mail greeting.** Smile while recording. Listen to the difference it makes—it might surprise you.
- 4. Phone calls.** When you’re on a call, be present. It’s obvious—and disrespectful—when callers are distracted and multitasking.
- 5. Conference calls.** Remember to use Mute. It’s annoying to hear someone munching, typing, or snoring on a conference call.
- 6. Conversations in person or by phone.** It’s polite to allow the other person to finish their sentence.
- 7. Interrupt courteously.** If it’s necessary to interject, try: “So allow me to stop you there....” Or, “To clarify, I’d like to ask....”
- 8. Meetings.** People know who’s listening and contributing—and who’s checking their cell phones. Respect the task at hand.
- 9. Written communication.** Tone of voice and physical clues are absent in a memo or an email. Use please, thank you, and other signs of courtesy and consideration.
- 10. All communication.** Ask how the recipient prefers to be contacted. Your message will be received more effectively through the preferred channel. ✱

A Letter From Meg Kaufman, MFT



If this feels like a year of change for you, here is good news: your "self" is significantly more malleable than you may realize. The front page article offers a few simple steps to help you tap into your brain's ability to change.

A teen's brain, the topic of the page 3 article, can be perplexing for parents trying to decipher their offspring's behavior. The article explores this enigma and offers insights into a teen's development.

While some people find it doesn't pay to throw caution to the wind, others feel more alive when choosing to take risks. Our quiz will help you take a look at how cautious, or not, you are.

Those of you dealing with sorrow brought on by a loss of any kind, or those who love someone who is experiencing grief, may find helpful guidance in the back page article on the subject of dealing with grief during the holidays.

Many of us now rely heavily on technology as a means of communication. Electronic or not, however, the same rules of etiquette apply. The Top 10 offers the best ways to ensure that your message is properly received.

If you have questions about the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

May this year bring you a deepened sense of self and true connection with those around you.

Are You Too Cautious?

Helen Keller, blind and deaf educator, said: "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." Sometimes it's wise to be cautious, particularly when physical safety is at stake. However, when we play it safe simply to protect our ego or heart, we may close off possibilities that could bring us greater joy and fulfillment. Life is what we make of it, shaped by our choices. What are you choosing? Answer "true" or "false" to the following statements to discover if you are too cautious.



True False

Set 1

- 1. Life doesn't feel safe. I'm content with things as they are and prefer to stay in my "comfort zone."
- 2. I'm afraid something bad will happen if I veer off my usual course. I feel safer and more confident when I stick to what I already know.
- 3. I frequently worry "what if...?" If I can't be certain of the outcome, I won't take the risk. Being rejected, looking stupid and failing are not options.
- 4. I know there are business and romantic opportunities I've missed out on because of being so risk-averse.
- 5. My fear of the unknown is paralyzing. When I look at my life, I have many regrets about things I didn't do.
- 6. I feel bad about myself for being so cautious. I think of myself as a coward and I expect that others see me that way, too.

Set 2

- 1. I am committed to growing myself bigger than my fears. It's not that I'm unafraid; it's just that I am more committed to my goals and know the cost of playing it safe.
- 2. Developing courage is like building a muscle. The more I practice taking risks, even small ones, the more empowered I feel.
- 3. When I have a goal or dream that feels big and scary, I minimize feeling overwhelmed by "chunking it down" into more manageable, short-term steps.
- 4. I enlist the support of those who can help me move beyond my comfort zone to a more fulfilling life.
- 5. When I take risks, I trust I can handle whatever comes. If I fall, I know that I can get up again. I don't conclude that I shouldn't have tried or that I'm a failure.
- 6. My biggest successes have come when I've taken a big leap of faith.

If you answered True more often in Set 1 and False more often in Set 2, you may wish to learn some effective ways to move beyond your comfort zone to live a more fulfilled life. Please call me if you'd like support in exploring this further. *

Teenagers: Why Do They Act Like That?

If you're raising a teenager, no doubt your mantra is "What were you thinking?" Teens aren't known for making the best decisions. Or planning ahead. Or considering consequences. The list of patience-trying teen behaviors goes on and on. . . .

Here's the good news. They'll get over it.

Here's the startling news. When they say, "But, Mom, it isn't my fault!" they may be partially right.

It's their brains.

In terms of human development, the brain undergoes two periods of enormous growth: from birth to about age four, and then again from about ages 10 to 14.

Dr. Jay Giedd, of the National Institute of Mental Health, says of the adolescent and teen years, "In many ways, it's the most tumultuous time of brain development since coming out of the womb."

Whereas an infant's and toddler's brain is literally growing, a teenager's brain is remodeling itself, mostly by making and pruning connections. Instead of having a screw loose, as the old saying goes about someone who makes poor decisions, teens—metaphorically speaking—have wires loose.

Up to this point, adolescents and teens have mostly been acting from their emotions (think limbic system) and pleasure-and-reward systems (think amygdala), which explains a lot about their behavior.

Now, as they approach and go through puberty, they are preparing to become adults, and their brains know it. It's time for the brain to rewire itself, adding millions of new connections between those emotional-impulsive behavioral centers and the frontal lobes, especially the prefrontal cortex.

This is the "executive" center of the brain, the area that is active when we rationally assess situations, consider the consequences of our and others' actions, and set priorities—generally all those things we expect our teens to know how to do but that their brains are not yet fully wired to do.

The prefrontal cortex is the last area of the brain to be developed, and the rewiring will go on well into their 20s.

At the same time that all these new connections are forming, your teen's brain is strengthening already existing connections and pruning less used ones. Whatever your teen is focusing on—sports, study, friendships or, conversely, zoning out in front of the TV or endlessly playing video games—gets reinforced by the brain. Those connective pathways that are not continually activated get pared away.

What's crucial about this rewiring is that it influences the skills that teens take with them into adulthood. To some extent the old adage "use it or lose it" holds true.



To be fair, this spurt of brain remodeling is not an excuse for a teen's sometimes exasperating behavior. But it does provide parents insight into why teens think something is a great idea when you don't, why they can't seem to plan or organize when you think doing so is a no-brainer, why they act without considering consequences that you think are incredibly obvious.

Simply put, at this point in their development, teen brains have problems separating what's important from what's not so important.

So how can you use this knowledge to your advantage?

Experts suggest strategies that include being clear in your instructions and guiding your teen with advice, but doing so with a soft touch. Your teen needs to "practice" being an adult without being punished for not yet being one.

Cultivate the patience to allow them to make mistakes with their growing independence. They are learning to curb their impulses and mediate their emotions. They are learning reasoning, logic and analysis.

Whether they show it or not, they will look to the adults in their lives—meaning you—as examples.

This is a trying time for many parents, for while teens might seem to be pushing you away as they "practice" being independent, they also will be secretly watching and learning from you since you are the most important adult in their life. ✨

Grief Takes No Holidays

For those experiencing sorrow, whether through death, separation, divorce, illness, job loss or relocation, the glittering commercialism and unrelenting cheer of the holiday season can be stressful.

Facing family celebrations with an empty chair at the table can make unbearable grief so much worse, says Karen Silbert, MD, Associate Professor of Anesthesiology at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, who suffered the loss of her five-month-old daughter.

Many people believe that anyone who has experienced great loss should be “over it” in six months or so. If only that were true. Emotions of the bereaved are raw and heal in their own time.

It can be difficult for those who are grieving to cope in social situations during the holidays, when tears would be out of place, Silbert says. At holiday time, many who are dealing with loss are often caught in a dilemma between the need to grieve and the pressure to “get into the spirit” of the season.

But holidays can stimulate memories and a renewed wave of pain,

which feels even more pronounced. And it’s not only holidays that may trigger deep feelings of new or renewed grief. Birthdays, anniversaries and other special occasions present a challenge for many, even after a number of years have passed.

While the experience of grief may ebb and flow, we should not expect it to altogether disappear, say grief counselors and experts. While it’s normal to hurt during the holidays, it’s also possible for the human heart to hope and heal.

Tending Grief

Here are some suggestions from grief expert Dr. Judith Johnson, author, educator, life coach and interfaith minister, to help the bereaved maintain inner balance during the holidays.

1. Reach out. Contact friends, family, support agencies, and anyone who can give you comfort during this difficult time.

2. However, be deeply honest about what you need. Honor what you need to

do and *not* do through the holidays or other significant occasions. Be patient, kind and compassionate with yourself about what is true for you.

3. Allow all your feelings. Grief expresses in many ways. Give yourself permission to feel lethargic, grumpy or out of sorts. Stay focused on what is happening inside you and tend to yourself as you would anyone else you love deeply.

4. Anticipate and plan ahead. “Don’t wait for others to make plans for you that may or may not have anything at all to do with what you really need,” Dr. Johnson said. “Face your truth and communicate what you need.”

5. Make room for your grief or sadness. “Grief is a very private matter and the holidays have a way of magnifying it,” Dr. Johnson counsels.

“Welcome your grief. Your sadness and tears are expressions of the healing process.” Be open to your grief and trust that it is healing. ✧



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