

Mike Reeves-McMillan, Health Coach and Hypnotherapist, presents...

Change Techniques

How You Can Use Simple, Effective Techniques
to Train Your Own Brain to Change in Ways That You Control
...and How to Succeed in the Personal Goals You Set For Yourself.



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Change Techniques

This ebook gives you simple, practical, effective techniques for any kind of personal change. It outlines what prevents you from changing and how you can overcome it and prevent those same old habits from returning in the future.

Introduction



I'm Mike Reeves-McMillan, hypnotherapist and health coach, and former technical writer and corporate trainer, and I'll be your guide as you explore how you can change your life.

This is a free ebook on techniques of personal change. It's based on a series of posts from my blog [Living Skillfully: Your Mind and Health](#).

I blog mostly about lifestyle changes which benefit your health, and how to make them. This ebook concentrates on the "how to make them" part.

I've also expanded it into a complete print book, including material on healthy lifestyle changes, accompanied by a hypnotherapy CD. If that's the direction of your personal change interest, you can

check out the book and CD on my website, www.hypno.co.nz.

This ebook is also part of my personal change email course, [Seven Steps to Effective Personal Change](#). If you're not already signed up for the course, it's well worth doing so. In a series of short videos, I take you step-by-step through the seven steps of writing a personal change plan, and provide other useful information and guidance as well. And the follow-on courses, **Change Your Mind** and **Transformation Skills**, build on what you've learned and take you further down the path of effective, lasting positive change.

Change is always around us - but not always within us

I remember the first computer I ever saw, as a teenager in the early 1980s. At the time it never occurred to me that one day I would make my living with computers, that I'd spend all day in front of one for years of my working life, that I'd own several at a time, that they'd be portable and yet both far cheaper and far more powerful than the computers of the 1980s - or that someday I'd be sitting here writing an ebook for distribution across a worldwide computer network that's accessible from the majority of Western homes. I've done not one, but several jobs that barely existed when I started school 30 years ago. And nobody, literally nobody, has any really reliable idea of what the next 30 years will bring.

Yet human nature remains the same. And one of the constants that we face is that we struggle to change sometimes.

That's why I wrote this ebook. We could all do with a little help in changing. I certainly don't have it all together, but I do know some useful, effective techniques, and I want to pass them on to you. Along the way, I'll share a little knowledge about how our minds work, and why we sometimes find it hard to make changes that we really, really want. I'll keep it accessible and non-technical, simple and practical.

Why it's Hard to Change Habits ...and how you can change them anyway

Have you ever struggled with a persistent habit that you just can't get rid of? This chapter tells you why - and gives you a start on doing something about it.

Change is hard. With the right knowledge, it gets easier.

You may have heard that we only use 10% of our brains. (You may even have seen the saying incorrectly attributed to Albert Einstein.) Of course, it isn't true; we use all of our brain at one time or another, though usually much less than 10% of it at any one time. And this is one reason that it's sometimes hard to change our behavior.



[Chefs In Action](#) by argearge

No part of the brain remains unused for long. From the point of view of the brain's neurons, it's like working in a busy kitchen; the moment you finish one task, someone nearby will grab you to work on another. Nobody is allowed to stand around idle.

Scientists who investigate neuroplasticity (the ability of the brain to change) have pointed out a paradox here. Because of this neural ability to swap tasks, and the requirement for each part of the brain to keep doing the task it has as long as the demand for it exists, change is actually quite difficult sometimes.

It's like having a bookshelf that is crammed with books; in order to put a new book on the shelf, you first have to take one of the existing ones off.

Or, in terms of real estate, think about wanting to build a new building in the inner city. To do so, you first have to knock an existing building down.

What this means is that if you have a habit, for example, that habit is taking up a certain amount of space on the mental bookshelf, a certain amount of real estate in Downtown Brain, and in order to create a new habit you have to do something to shift the old one.



[books](#) by robina

Something like what?



[Mico - Saguí](#) by Auroquero

Something like **paying attention**. An excellent book on brain plasticity for intelligent laypeople is Sharon Begley's *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*, which spends a lot of time discussing the power of attention. It describes, for example, a fascinating experiment with monkeys.

You take your monkeys, and you set them up with headphones through which you play sounds, and little devices which gently stroke one hand of each monkey. Every monkey gets the same sounds and the same hand stimuli.

Now, you reward half the monkeys with juice when they make responses that coincide with changes in the sounds, but not when they respond to changes in the hand stimuli, and the other half of the monkeys you reward the other way round. Monkeys are smart, and they love juice. Pretty soon, half the monkeys are paying attention to the sounds and ignoring the hand stimuli, and the other half are paying attention to the hand stimuli and ignoring the sounds, even though both groups are getting both sets of stimuli.

After some time, you map the monkeys' brains. You mapped their brains before you started the experiment, so you know how large the section of brain was that's concerned with distinguishing changes in sound, and how large the section was that notices stimulation to the hand. What you'll find is that the monkeys that paid attention to the sounds are now using more of their brains for sound, and the monkeys that paid attention to the touch are now using more of their brains for touch. **Attention reshapes the brain.**



And how do you affect attention? People, just like monkeys, pay attention to things that are important to them in some way - either as a threat or as a reward. And something that is associated with a reward gets the same attention that you would pay to the reward itself. So, step one, **pay attention**; step two, **reward attention**,

[Brain in hand](#) by juliaf

and to make it even more effective, step three, **reward change**. You won't succeed in changing your habit if you're not paying attention to it and rewarding yourself when you succeed. (Punishing yourself when you fail will only focus attention on the failure; I don't recommend it.)

So, each time you catch yourself in your habit, ask yourself these three questions:

- ☑ **“What am I doing?”** This focuses your attention on the behavior.
- ☑ **“Why am I doing this?”** If you understand what you’re getting from the behavior, you can start thinking of strategies to replace it with behavior you would prefer.
- ☑ **“How can I deal with it better?”** This starts to replace the old behavior with the new, desired behavior, and, importantly, it associates the new behavior with the circumstances in which you had the old behavior.

The number one technique you need to change your life

Losing weight. Stopping smoking. Getting out of a cycle of bad relationships. Exercising. Eating better. Getting out of your rut and doing what you really want to do. It’s hard, am I right? And you don’t know where to start.

I see people through my hypnotherapy practice all the time who are in this situation. They really, really want to change their life, but they just don’t know how. And for every person I see, there are hundreds who want to change just as much.

There are a lot of things I can tell them, but the key thing I do is this: I work on their awareness.

Awareness, attention, mindfulness if you’re a meditator, being conscious... All of these are names for a phenomenon that is absolutely central to personal change. **If you’re not paying attention, you’re not going to change.**

Our minds are very good at “protecting” us from being aware of things that will disturb us. So good, in fact, that they often prevent us from noticing things that we really need to know about. It’s like we’ve disconnected the wires to our dashboard because that “check engine” light kept coming on all the time, and it was bothering us...

The essential thing about awareness - conscious awareness of our own emotions and thoughts - is that when we are aware we’re able to integrate the rational and irrational parts of our mind and get them working together.

The mind is like a parliament, except that there doesn’t seem to be a Speaker. The closest thing we have is the prefrontal cortex, which regulates and inhibits emotion. The problem is, a lot of the time the emotional parts of the brain aren’t listening:

Member for Sadness: Chocolate is clearly required at this time.

Other members: Coffee! Cigarettes! Beer!

Member for Sadness: Chocolate! I say chocolate!

Member for Guilt: The Honorable Member is an idiot and should be ashamed of herself.

Prefrontal cortex: Order! Order! The Member for Guilt will withdraw that remark and apologise.

Member for Guilt: And she’s fat, and getting fatter.

Prefrontal cortex: Order! I will have order!

Member for Sadness: Chocolate! I will have chocolate!



[European Parliament, Strasbourg](#) by inyuch

Why does this disconnect occur, and how can we overcome it?

The short answer is, we’ve trained ourselves from childhood not to pay attention to our emotions, because they were calling for things that, as children, we didn’t have the ability to provide for them: security, stability, love. They’ve responded to this by calling for things that we can provide: coffee, cigarettes, beer, chocolate. These (and other legal and illegal drugs, and some behaviours as well) change the chemical balance of the brain and make us feel better, without ever addressing the underlying issue.

What I say to my clients is: As long as you turn your back on these things, it’s like you see a big shadow looming over you. But when you turn around and face them, they’re really not that big after all.

So: Face your fear, anger, sadness, guilt or whatever it is you're avoiding, and you'll find, first, that it isn't so bad, and second, that you can change your life after all.

Next, I'll talk about some easy ways to start facing your emotions and integrating your mind so that you feel more in control and can give up some of the other ways you manage your moods - ways that can bring about problems of their own.

Summary

We find it hard to change because our brains are always fully committed to the patterns that they already have. To change those patterns, we need to pay attention to what we're doing and focus on new patterns that will work better for us.



[Fabric on a gauze](#) by johnnyberg

Managing Moods, Emotions and Stress

Research shows pretty clearly that one of the most powerful reasons that people return to habits they thought they were finished with is stress. Anyone who's struggled with addiction of any kind probably knows this. There's some mechanism in our brains that propels us back to old, bad solutions when things get difficult. What can we do about this?

One simple step towards managing emotions

Managing moods and emotions is something that many of us struggle with. Sometimes it seems like every day something happens that instantly triggers off fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, sadness, despair, guilt or shame. But with a simple technique, you can start managing those emotional hijacks and bringing them under your control.



[Emotion figures](#) by Fuyoh!

Anyone who's had successful "talk therapy," or even a helpful conversation with a friend who just listened, knows that sometimes putting our emotions into words helps us to get over them. It works with written words, too, as you'll know if you journal. A study of expressive writing by cancer patients, reported in *The Oncologist* in 2008, found that even a 20-minute, one-off session of expressive writing, while waiting for an appointment in a busy clinic, helped improve cancer patients' quality of life.

What's happening when we put our feelings into words? Matthew D. Lieberman and colleagues did a brain imaging study, reported in *Psychological Science*. They found that when participants in the study labeled the emotions they were feeling, it disrupted the activity of the amygdala (which isn't a Star Wars princess but a part of the brain involved in emotion). The use of words activates a different part of the brain, and appears to shift the mental activity there, away from feeling the emotion. The amygdala is quite a basic part of the brain, sitting just above the brainstem, which keeps things like our breathing and heartbeat going. The part of the brain that uses words, on the other hand, is a lot more sophisticated, and shifting control over to it gives you a lot more options to work with.

The way that I show my clients to exploit this effect is based on Mary Mrozowski's "welcoming prayer", which isn't actually a prayer at all. It's simply a practice to use when you notice yourself feeling an emotion: saying "Welcome" and giving it a name – "Welcome, fear," "Welcome, anger" or whatever the emotion might be.

In doing so, you are paying attention to the emotion – so it won't go behind your back and manipulate you into doing something you may regret. You are accepting the emotion as being part of your conscious experience, which then enables you to let it go more easily. And you are naming the emotion, which brings into play the mechanism identified by Lieberman and his team.

Until I got into the habit of using this naturally, I used to practice in the shower most mornings, when I was relaxed, just welcoming the four main negative emotions – fear, anger, sadness and guilt. That way, when one of them comes along during the day, I'm in the habit of the welcoming practice and can immediately discharge a lot of the energy of the emotion.

A simple mood control technique and how it works

One of the simplest and most powerful techniques in my hypnotherapist repertoire is **anchoring**, in which you associate a touch with a mental state or mood. Anyone can use this; it doesn't even require hypnosis, though it will certainly be more powerful with hypnosis. (My Therapeutic Relaxation hypnosis recording, which I'll send you with the lesson on this chapter, includes anchoring.)

The easiest form of the technique is this: Imagine yourself as vividly as possible into the mental state or mood you want - calm, confidence or whatever you like. Start with a memory of being in that state, and make the memory big and bright, loud and clear, firm and strong; see what you saw, hear what you heard, feel what you felt, if there are smells or tastes include them too, and turn up the power on the memory as if you were adjusting the controls on a TV or radio.

You can use Michael Breen's "nested images" technique to build it up even more strongly. Imagine yourself in the state as if you were looking at yourself from outside, and notice what you look like. Then mentally "step into" the image of yourself in that state so that it's you who's experiencing it. Once you've done this, imagine yourself from outside again experiencing the state even more strongly, and repeat until you are as deeply in the state as you can manage.

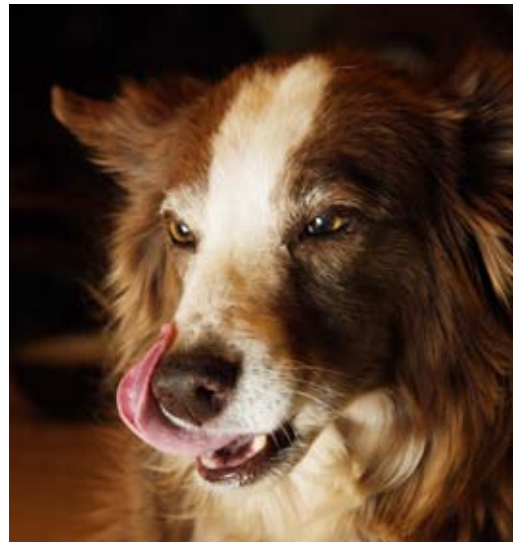
When you have the state or mood as clear as possible, and are experiencing it very strongly, touch your thumb to one of your fingers - it can be any one, though most people pick the forefinger - and press firmly for a few seconds.

You need to practice this a few times, but once you have done so, that mood or state is available to you at any time simply by using the thumb-and-finger press. Try it.

Why does this work? It's based on what is known as Hebb's Law, usually paraphrased as "Neurons that fire together, wire together."

The most famous experiment is that of Pavlov's dogs, where he rang a bell and fed the dogs, and after a while was able to make the dogs salivate just by ringing the bell. The bell had nothing inherently to do with food, but because it had been repeatedly associated with food by occurring at the same time, the neurons (brain cells) that were set off by the bell became connected to those for the response to food.

In the case of anchoring, the memory you summon up is like the food, in that it is already strongly linked to the mood or mental state (which is like the salivation). The touch of the finger and thumb is like the bell. What you have done by practicing and repeatedly associating the two in time is to create a link - a mental pathway in your brain - between the two, so that the mood or state is now available to you on demand. You've reshaped your brain using attention, which is possible because your brain is "plastic" - capable of being changed in response to what it processes.



Dog Licks its Chops by Chance Agrella

Relaxation Response Practice

The two techniques I've talked about so far - the welcoming practice and anchoring - are good for in-the-moment dealing with emotions and moods. Here's a longer-term practice which does a couple of things: It trains you to relax, and it develops the useful skill of simply letting go of thoughts and emotions which you don't require just at the moment. Practiced regularly, it can bring about positive changes in your mental attitude and daily demeanor as well as improving your skills for coping with stress.

Dr Herbert Benson, Director Emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, has done extensive research since the 1970s to show that what he calls the "relaxation response" is beneficial for anxiety, cardiac problems, headache, hypertension (high blood pressure), irritable bowel syndrome, insomnia and pain, among other conditions. He claims that it helps with any disease that is either caused or made worse by stress, in proportion to the contribution of the stress to the disease.

There are two essential steps to bringing about the response:

1. Repeating a word, sound, phrase or action.
2. Letting go of any thoughts that arise and returning to your repetition.

In fuller form:

1. Choose a word or short phrase to be your focus. If you hold religious or spiritual beliefs, you could use a name, word or phrase associated with those beliefs; if not, choose one which reflects important, positive values to you, like "peace" or "compassion".
2. Find a quiet place and sit comfortably.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Progressively relax your muscles, either from head to foot or foot to head. Let your muscles relax, don't try to "make" them relax. Become aware of any tension in them, and allow that tension to release as if it was leaking out.
5. Breathe slowly and deeply, but without forcing, and say your focus word or phrase silently to yourself on each outbreath.
6. Thoughts will come to mind. Let them go past. If you find you have followed a trail of thoughts away from your repetition, just gently let the thoughts go and return to your focus on the next breath.
7. Use some kind of timer to signal you after 10 to 20 minutes.

8. When the timer goes off, let other thoughts gradually return for a minute or so, then open your eyes and sit for another minute before standing.

9. Practice once or twice daily. Good times to do so are before breakfast and before dinner.

If you prefer to be guided verbally through the process, I've made a recording of the relaxation response practice, which I'll send you with the lesson on this chapter.

A helpful metaphor I sometimes use for the practice is that you are standing by the side of the road watching the cars (the thoughts and feelings) go past. Just watching. If you find that you have walked out into the road, climbed into one of the cars and are being driven off somewhere you hadn't planned to go, just get out and return to the side of the road.

There's no wrong way to do this exercise. If you find you are always returning to your focus after drifting away, you are getting useful practice in returning to your focus after drifting away. If you find you are keeping your focus for long periods of time, you're practicing that. It's a very gentle practice because there's no guilt or blame in drifting away a hundred times or more and coming back. This in itself is good practice if you are in the habit of blaming or criticizing yourself. Whether you stay focussed or whether you are constantly returning to your focus, you're doing it right.

Feelings and images, by the way, count as thoughts for the purposes of this exercise. We're not just talking about verbal thoughts.

What you may find after practicing for a while is that you are starting to let go of the more superficial responses you have been making in the past, and that buried parts of yourself are emerging. They may be angry or unhappy parts. Let the emotions come, and let them go, just like wind passing over the grass. If you don't pump more energy into them by offering them resistance, they will dissipate by themselves in time. It may help to name them before letting them go.



[High Street](#) by CmdrGravy

Summary

Just as paying attention to your habits helps you to change them, so paying attention to your moods and emotions helps to change those also. And with the simple techniques of the Welcoming Practice, anchoring, and the Relaxation Response Practice, you can reduce your stress and increase your feelings of being in control.

Next Steps

Change can be exciting and an opportunity to discover more about who we are as people, to improve our lives and the lives of others. I hope that the ideas, techniques and knowledge I've shared in this free ebook have helped you come closer to your own goals and given you a clearer idea of how to make your own personal changes. If you've received this from someone else, rather than as a bonus part of my free email course, [Seven Steps to Effective Personal Change](#), I encourage you to follow the link I just gave you and sign up for the course. It takes you step-by-step through making a personal change plan, and also through additional insights and bonus materials that relate to this ebook.

If you have done that course and found the advice good and the techniques effective, why not sign up for my next course, [Change Your Mind](#)? You will receive:

- More simple, effective techniques for focussing on personal change**
- More relaxing recordings**
- More easy-to-follow systems**
- Another useful worksheet and more practical guides**
- More valuable advice**

...to move you forward to the next step of your change journey and keep you motivated, engaged and empowered.

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