

Should vs. Want

We often say, “I should” do something, such as exercise more frequently, but don’t take action. Often this “something” requires a change in our behavior that we resist. We’re not quite ready to make the effort. When we resist, our brain places the impetus to start the behavioral change into a “future self,” not our “present self.” In brain imaging scans when subjects are asked to think about their “**future self**,” it’s located in a **different** part of the cortex than our “**present self**.” It’s located where “**strangers**” show up in imaging scans.ⁱ It’s as if our brain expects **someone else** to exercise for us. This also can occur when we are told by parents or family, we “should” do something and we agree, half-heartedly.

If we say we **want** to exercise, we move the locus of control to ourselves. We take ownership. The **motivation becomes internal, rather than external**. Saying want vs. should won’t get you to the gym, but it’s a good way to change your perspective from your “future self” to your “present self.”

Why is it so hard to change our habits? Because our habits are neural circuits wired into our brains through repetition, sometimes for years. Neurons that fire together, wire together.ⁱⁱ Due to neuroplasticity, we have the ability to redirect neural circuits to form new habits, learn and change,ⁱⁱⁱ but it’s not easy.

In 1821 Charles Barbier invented a form of writing using raised dots for use by the French Army in dark battlefields he called “night writing.” His system proved too complicated for soldiers, but when Louis Braille, an eleven-year-old student at the National Institute of the Blind in Paris was introduced to “night writing”, he simplified and developed it into modern braille. He published his first book of “writing in dots” in 1829, which he expanded to include musical notations. In 1991 neuroscientists discovered that the **unused visual area of the cortex is reconfigured** to process tactile signals when blind patients read braille.^{iv} They literally **rewire their brains**.

So how do we motivate ourselves to exercise? First say, “I want to exercise, not should.” It’s up to you, no one else. (Present self vs. a stranger) Second, no amount of motivation will overcome your self-identity if you say, “I’m not a walker.” Are you willing to change how you view yourself? Habits linked to a **new identity** stick much better than those you are “**trying out**”.^v

If you’re ready: 1) Define a trigger for the habit. 2) Make the behavior you want to initiate easy. 3) Remove barriers and distractions. 4) Reward yourself when you

follow through. 6) Add social influence to motivate you. 7) Start with baby steps.
8) Seek social support.

Walking in the front door after work could be your cue to go for a walk - (trigger). Put your sneakers, shorts and top on the kitchen table before you leave for work – (make the behavior easy). Unplug the TV and put the remote in the garage – (remove barriers and distractions). Plan a short walk around the block – (baby steps). When you get home take a long bath (reward yourself) and call your biggest fan (how long since you called your mom?) to tell her you’ve started a new workout routine- (social support). If you need additional motivation, ask a friend to join you for a walk after work – (social influence). The key is to get started and develop a consistent routine. Keeping track of your walks on a calendar will improve your consistency. Don’t beat yourself up if you miss one day, but try not to miss two. Give yourself 10 weeks to build a new health habit.^{vi}

To learn more, read *Atomic Habits* by James Clear.

ⁱ H. Hershfield, “Future self-continuity: how conceptions of the future self-transform intertemporal choice.” (2011) *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Oct., Volume 1235: pgs. 30-43.

ⁱⁱ D. Hebb, “The organization of behavior: a neuropsychological theory.” (1949) Wiley and sons.

ⁱⁱⁱ V. Demarin et al., “Neuroplasticity” (2014) *Periodicum biologorum*, Vol 116 No. 2

^{iv} F. Uhl et al. “On the Functionality of the Visually Deprived Occipital Cortex in Early Blind Persons.” (1991) *Neuroscience letters*, Apr;124(2) pgs. 256-259.

^v C Bryan et al. “Motivating Voter turnout by invoking the self.” *Proceedings of the national academy of sciences*. (2011) 108, no 31. Pgs. 12653-12656

^{vi} B. Gardener et al. “Making health habitual: the psychology of ‘habit formation’ and general practice.” (2012) *British journal of general practice*. Dec. 62(605) pgs. 664-666