



THE NEUROSCIENCE OF NEW HABITS

BY SHARON EAKES

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

—Aristotle

According to the dictionary, a habit is "an acquired behavior pattern regularly followed until it has become almost involuntary." Since we repeatedly think and do many of the same things every day, each of us has developed a lot of habits, some comforting and supportive, others negative and destructive. A few examples are:

- The way we treat people
- The way we approach challenges
- The way we spend our free time
- Our usual response to stress
- How we organize thoughts, tasks, stuff

The Good News

The really good news about habits comes from the study of the brain. Scientists have discovered that what happens in the brain when we repeat something over and over is that a pathway called a neural circuit is formed, and it gets stronger every time we think or do the same thing. Like a river cutting through a valley, the longer it flows in the same path, the deeper and stronger that path becomes. That's how habits are made. So all we have to do to create a new habit is to do something else repeatedly. We've all heard that it takes three weeks to create a habit. Science now has the evidence. It takes the brain about three

weeks to create strong new neural circuits, a new path for the river to take.

Adopting a New Behavior

Don't spend a lot of time resisting the old pattern or trying to drop it. Brain research shows that focusing on something strengthens it—so better to put your energy into the new behavior.

Here's a super tip: Simply thinking about the new habit—imagining it in your mind's eye or thinking of yourself already having it—helps build the new habit. So when you're committed to a new habit, spend a lot of time rehearsing it in your mind. Deal with feelings that threaten to derail you by mental note-taking. If feelings of frustration or anger, annoyance or fear knock you off balance, brain research offers this: Label what you're feeling. Either silently or out loud, saying "I am nervous" or "I am frustrated" calms the brain so it can get back on track.

Sometimes we can develop new habits that indirectly get us what we want. An exercise habit can improve our health, a savings habit can finance a dream vacation, and building simple practices like hugging six times a day can enhance a marriage. Becoming a systems thinker can help us make better decisions. According to systems educator Linda Booth Sweeney, making systems thinking a life-long learning habit includes learning to ask different kinds of questions—for

example, ones that get at patterns of behavior over time; that focus your attention on balancing or reinforcing processes; and that surface potential unintended consequences.

The best discovery of the recent research is that our brains have the ability to change dramatically throughout our lives, until the day we die. As simplistic as all this sounds, it is truly based on neuroscience, the study of how the brain works.

Coaching Questions

Look at your habits of thought, attitude, and behavior. Which ones do you want to reinforce and which would you rather replace?

- What's a new thought or attitude habit you want to develop?
- What will you practice to make sure it sticks?
- What's a new behavior you want to cultivate?
- How can you see that it reroutes a river in your brain?
- Why not make excellence a habit in your life, as Aristotle suggested? ■

Sharon Eakes is a trainer and executive coach with Hope Unlimited. She has a background in psychology and management. For 25 years, she worked at Gateway Rehabilitation Center in western Pennsylvania, where she was the vice president of treatment programs. Sharon is also chair of the board of directors of Pegasus Communications. This column is adapted from her free mini-ezine *Fresh Views*; to subscribe, go to <http://www.hopellc.com/ezine.html>.