

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF SUCCESSFUL HABIT CHANGE FOR COACHES: A ONE-NIGHT STAND OR A LASTING RELATIONSHIP?

What can brain research tell us about how our clients can work towards their goals? **Ken Nowack** outlines some key points around what neuroscience means for achieving lasting change.

Many of us are particularly good at setting goals, but not nearly as successful at attaining them. Indeed, the initiation of new behaviours and sustaining them over time is likely particularly challenging for most coaching clients. Neuroscientist Elliot Berkman suggests that successful habit and behaviour change are heavily influenced by two specific networks in the brain¹ that facilitate the motivational aspects of getting going ('The Will') and implementation strategies that lead to successful goal accomplishment ('The Way').

'The Will' (default mode brain network) relates to the emotional and motivational aspects of behaviour change (i.e., why a goal or new habit is important to a client). In contrast, 'The Way' (executive function/task positive brain network) refers to aspects of habit change such as creating a specific plan, rewarding goal accomplishments, and evaluating a client's progress to ensure goal success.

Forming a new habit takes both motivation and deliberate practice over time to build neuroplasticity and automaticity. Several studies on mindfulness meditation suggest it takes 3 to 8 weeks of deliberate practice to result in observable changes at a neural level.² In our own research³ we asked participants to practise a form of meditative self-hypnosis nightly for 12 weeks and found a significant reduction in a marker of systemic inflammation (IL-6) from initial levels.

It is important to note that these observed changes in our brain or immune system may not necessarily translate to improved behaviour. Let's look at some specific neuroscience-based facts and strategies to enhance your client's motivation to get going ('The Will') and to maintain new habits and behaviours over time ('The Way').

STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE SUCCESSFUL GOAL SETTING WITH CLIENTS

Here are two important things we know about the neuroscience around formulating meaningful goals ('The Will') and some coaching strategies you can use with your clients.

Goal setting strategy #1

look for ways to enhance intrinsic motivation in clients

Fact: Clients are more likely to focus on behaviours when they are intrinsically motivated for intentional change.⁴ Our brain is a 'cost-benefit calculator' and reacts more strongly to penalties, punishment, and loss than other external motivators. In one study⁵ participants who were offered a monetary reward for achieving a goal of walking 7,000 steps a day were 50% less successful than those who had the same amount taken away from their bank account each day.

Strategy: First, clarify with your client exactly what they are most interested in focusing on at a behavioural level (stop doing something, start doing something, do less, do more or do differently). Also, define whether the desire is to do this once (e.g., run a marathon), sometimes, or all the time to become part of their routines. Ask your client to define where they are now (current self) and where they want to be (future self). Current studies⁶ suggest that this clarity early in coaching meetings facilitates greater acceptance of the goal and desire to work on it.

Goal setting strategy #2

have your clients break down goals into tiny subgoals

Fact: An overly complicated or difficult client goal impedes success. Helping your client define their goals into tiny habits⁷ increases the motivation and belief they can be successful. Your clients will start new habit change efforts with great enthusiasm and excitement. However, they are more likely to slack off or lose motivation around the middle of a project.

Strategy: Try to assess and reduce the difficulty level of the desired goal or behaviour with your client (i.e., make it easier to do). Create 'shorter middles' by having your client break their goals into much smaller chunks to maintain stamina until goal success is achieved. Keep in mind there is greater motivation⁸ when clients focus on, monitor, and track completed progress at the beginning (versus what is left to be done) and what is left to do (versus what was completed) toward the very end of goal pursuit.

STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE SUCCESSFUL GOAL ACCOMPLISHMENT IN CLIENTS

Behaviour change intentions are poor predictors⁹ of actual goal success and long-term habit change. Here are two neuroscience-based goal striving strategies to use with your clients to translate goal intentions into actual practice resulting in new habits that stick.

Goal striving strategy #1 use 'if/then' practise plans

Fact: Just defining a desired future behaviour is unlikely to result in successful behaviour change. In fact, some approaches to goal setting such as using SMART goals aren't very smart.¹⁰ Instead, use 'if/then' implementation plans¹¹ that have been shown to double the likelihood of goal success.

Strategy: 'If/Then' goals have two components. The first, the 'If', is a situation, time or trigger (e.g., a weekly staff meeting) that cues up a behaviour you want your client to practise. The 'Then' is a statement of the specific behaviour they want to implement (e.g., doing something more, less, or differently). Instead of your client creating a goal intention such as 'I want to be a better active listener,' help them to translate this into an implementation intention using and 'If/Then' approach (e.g., *If I am leading my weekly team meeting, then will solicit input from other team members and summarise what I hear before sharing my point of view*).

Goal striving strategy #2 encourage your clients to practise, practise, practise

Fact: In general, it takes approximately 6 to 8 repetitions of a new behaviour close together in time to begin neuro wiring. Research¹² by Phillippa Lally and colleagues from the University College London suggest that new behaviours can become automatic, on average, in 66 days (range was 18 to 254 days) but it also depends on the complexity of what new behaviour your client is trying to put into place and their personality (e.g., conscientiousness). It takes more than a one-shot training programme or brief coaching engagement to ensure someone has adequate practice to create the automaticity we associate with new habits that can be sustained over time (i.e., neurons that fire together begin to wire together).

Strategy: Build in adequate 'nudges' (reminders) to keep the goal visible and use a full range of rewards and social support to ensure continuous practice to facilitate habit formation. Tracking and monitoring progress also helps to reinforce the desired behaviour and provides a metric of success to continue: even when clients hit those inevitable bumps in the road that might lead to a lapse in behaviour or a full-blown relapse.

For both learning and performance-based goals, lifestyle habits can either facilitate or interfere with goal success. For example, it is known that physical activity increases a brain fertilizer (BDNF; brain derived neurotrophic factor) that enhances memory and learning and exercise after learning. Research suggests that memory and learning is optimized four hours¹³ after being physically active. Additionally, lack of quality sleep, even for one night, interferes with psychomotor functioning, memory, and performance on new tasks equivalent to the effect of being legally drunk¹⁴ in most countries.

KNOWING WHEN TO FOLD 'EM...

'Never quit' is a saying that might play loudly in your client's mind. However, surprising research suggest that clients who do not persist in obtaining hard to reach goals¹⁵ have significantly lower inflammation, decreased cortisol secretion, and decreased emotional distress. Sometimes, you can help your clients redefine and modify their initial goals in the face of insurmountable obstacles, to help them remain healthy. It is said that 'only wet babies' prefer a change. That may be true, but by adopting one or more of the habit change strategies associated with the two different neural pathways associated with motivated goal setting ('The Will') and planning/execution ('The Way') we are more likely to help our clients shift from goal setting to successful goal accomplishment.

Heuristics for successful goal setting

- **High/low range goals:** Clients are more likely to engage a goal when they have set a high-low range goal (e.g., lose 2–4 pounds this week) than when they have set a single number goal.¹⁶
- **Share your goals with others:** Clients who write their goals, share their commitment with others, and send weekly progress reports were 33% more successful than those who did not write their goals or share their intentions with others.¹⁷
- **Use 'if/then' goals:** Goal intentions are weak predictors of actual behaviour change but clients who match a 'trigger' or cue with a specific behaviour are significantly more likely to be successful.

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