

You Can't Simply Decide to Be a Different Person

January 19, 2022

When I was a kid, my dad did something on family vacations that perplexes me to this day: He ran. Every day, at least four or five miles, rising before the sun and before anyone else was awake. He wasn't training for anything. He wasn't trying to lose weight. There was no specific goal, no endpoint, no particular reason he couldn't take the week off while in the greater Disney World metropolitan area, which, in July, is hotter than the surface of the sun. He was just running, like he had basically every day since time immemorial. My dad will turn 75 next week, and whenever you're reading this, he has probably already been out for a run today.

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The conventional wisdom on changing habits goes something like this: You can change if you really want to. Americans especially tend to see ourselves and one another as individuals with identical reservoirs of willpower, which some people choose to use and others do not. If you can't figure out how to get up at 4:30 in the morning to make sure you get five miles in before commuting to work every day, which my dad somehow did for 30 years, you're not trying hard enough, or you don't want it badly enough, or you're not motivated enough. Try harder.

Now, as anyone who has ever tried anything might suspect, it sure seems like that idea might be bullshit. Or at least, many researchers have concluded that it does not account for an enormous amount of observed human behavior, according to the psychologist Wendy Wood. In her book *Good Habit, Bad Habit*, she explains that for the latter half of the 20th century, psychological scholarship more or less affirmed its righteousness. Attitude leads behavior, the theory went, and the circumstances in which you exist aren't that important to the choices you make. Individuals do certain things and not others mostly because of their own conscious decisions; your fate is largely in your own hands. You can see how this logic permeated culture: The self-help and diet industries boomed, the government slashed the social safety net's tires, the 1970s became the Me Decade.

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