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Can You Will Your Way Out of Addiction?

by Rita Milios

My client had a sheepish grin on her face. “You know,” she said, the corners of her mouth twitching as she further processed an emerging insight. “I think I drink partly just to piss my husband off.”

“I guess that’s understandable,” I said, “given your description of him as being extremely ‘controlling.’ But isn’t that a bit like cutting off your nose to spite your face?” My client got the point, and we continued on to discuss her deeper, more personal motivations for wanting to manage her addiction.

After the session, I reflected on another client who had also mentioned that part of her reluctance to “do the right thing” and control her drinking was that she did not want her husband to think that she had given in to his nagging. And she certainly did not want him to think that she had done it simply to please him. When she finally came to the conclusion that she wanted to reduce her drinking—for herself—she made substantial reductions in her daily consumption.

Willpower and Recovery

The examples above demonstrate the importance of internal motivation as part of a recovery process. Is it possible to “will” yourself out of addiction? Actually, it’s not that simple, but recent breakthroughs in neurobiology and brain imaging have given us insight into the roles that willpower and motivation play in the recovery process.

Motivation encourages us to reach for a goal. Willpower makes sure it happens.—*Rita Milios*

Willpower involves a state of mental intention and conscious choice. We defer to it when we prioritize what is “good” for us and allow this factor to “trump” our impulsive desires. But sometimes, we fail to recognize when our outer, more reactionary motivations are at odds with our deeper, more personally fulfilling motivations, as in my examples above.

Because motivation and willpower are closely linked, you can enhance one by enhancing the other. I developed what I call an 8-Step Mindful Motivation Sequence for my clients to use when they need to activate their motivation and tap into their willpower. Mindful Motivation requires mindfulness, or bringing to full conscious awareness deep, innermost intentions, and then making informed decisions based on these, not on habituated, impulsive reactions.

The 8-Step Mindful Motivation Sequence

- **Step 1: Start with the right attitude**

With an attitude of mindfulness, first make a conscious, definite choice and intend to follow through. Then act on your commitment—whether you “feel” like it or not. You have to “prime the pump” with an initial act of will because motivation follows action. It does not precede it.

- **Step 2: Set realistic goals**

You’re never going to “just do it” if “it” seems impossible. So set a goal that is realistic for you. You can always update it to a more challenging goal later on, when the energy of success pushes you forward.

- **Step 3: Break your goal down into smaller steps**

This is the key to the whole process! If a goal seems daunting, you are likely to give up before you get out of the starting gate. But if you break your goal down to a point where you can say, “Yes, I am willing to do that,” then you will likely take the first step. From there, you’ll gain momentum to keep moving forward.

- **Step 4: Use the energy generated from small successes as stepping-stones to further successes**

Success breeds more success. With the right attitude and a focus on your interim progress, you set up a “success cycle” that re-energizes itself and continually feeds your motivation. Each small step, once taken, gives you a boost to help you get to the next step.

- **Step 5: Focus on what you want, not on what you don’t want**

Often, when considering long-term lifestyle changes, we think about all the things we’ll have to give up. That seldom works because it puts us into a “deprivation mindset,” which works against us. It is always more motivating to imagine ourselves moving toward a positive experience than moving away from a negative one, because our brains are hard-wired to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Use positive self-talk to keep your focus on what you want.

- **Step 6: Reinforce the habit of discipline**

At this point, your challenge is to maintain your motivation over the long haul. Recognize that what you have actually created is the beginning of new lifestyle habits—habits that will serve you well over your entire lifetime. Habits take conscious effort and willpower to start, but once they are set, they pretty much run on their own.

- **Step 7: Remain flexible**

Sometimes, the best-laid plans go awry. At some point, despite your best efforts and determined intentions, you may find that you have relapsed. Go back to your original intent and re-focus on that. Don’t let yourself be deterred by a slip. Get back to your plan as quickly as you can and use willpower to choose to focus on regaining your self-discipline and reinstating your newly acquired positive habits. Be mindful that your long-term goal is still intact. A setback is just a temporary detour.

- **Step 8: Reward and reinforce**

Congratulate yourself when you reach a goal (interim or long-term). The emotional energy you generate with positive feelings and positive self-talk will reinforce your commitment and motivation and help you to maintain your success cycle over the long haul.