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Identity v. Habits

Skills and Professional Development



Lately, I have noticed a recurring theme will pop up in the material I have been exploring. In particular, I am interested in changing one's self through habits, rather than by changing some aspect of our core identity.

Saying we need to change suggests there is something wrong with us. While some of us may have issues that require professional intervention, I'm referring more generally to the behaviors that are not moving us to where we want to be.

For instance, if a friend describes herself as a procrastinator, she is reinforcing the very behaviors she wants to discontinue. Our mind is a sponge and will soak up whatever we tell it. If we constantly tell ourselves we are procrastinators, or whatever other label we've adopted, we are actually making it more difficult to change that characteristic.

But being a procrastinator is not part of our true identity, it is only a habit we have when it comes to delaying work. Do you see the difference? It is subtle, and you may think this is just simply reframing it. However, that difference is huge when you are seeking to make a major life adjustment.

If you are a procrastinator, how do you stop being something you are? It's not that you cannot stop being a procrastinator — you can — but the approach to the change is different. Are you willing to take the time to find out why you are procrastinating? To discover what you are getting out of being one? Identities are much harder to address than habits, because identities are ingrained.

If you choose to see the procrastination as a habit rather than part of your core identity, you can address the habit from an objective point of view with proven habit change techniques.

In *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, by former New York Times journalist Charles Duhigg, he describes a cue, routine, and reward in each and every habit. There are points in time when you can change what you are doing to replace one habit (the one you don't want) with a new habit (the one you do want). As we learn to recognize the cue and the reward, we can address our routines to get a different outcome.

Using the procrastination example, in those moments when we are putting off taking action, we have to acknowledge what we are doing and then break the pattern. When we understand our ability to take action we become an unstoppable force of change.

This is where Mel Robbins comes in. In her book, *The 5 Second Rule*, she provides a tool to break the habit loop so that we can take control of the situation before we behave in an automatic fashion. She suggests we countdown backward from five and then do what we have decided to do.

So in the procrastination example, instead of lollygagging when there is a brief or memo to draft, my friend would sit down and type instead of going for coffee with colleagues. As she started to get up from her desk, she would remember Robbins' advice and countdown, "Five, four, three, two, one," and then start typing.

If we were addressing this issue from the perspective of identity, it would be important to understand why we are the way we think we are. As we are modifying the behavior, when we have to address the same behavior time and again, we'll either give up because "that's who we are" or we'll keep trying but feel badly about ourselves.

One of the things we will have to remember in this process is that habits are developed over time and replacing them with new habits will take time as well. In most instances it will not be a one-and-done proposition, but we will likely have to go through the process consciously multiple times before the new habit starts to become ingrained, which means we cannot give up until the new behavior truly is a habit.

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