

THE  
DAVIS FOUNDATION  
FOR PROVIDING  
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of January 14, 2004

Dear Reader,

As each new year begins, many people make New Year's resolutions. One person resolves to go on a diet, another to exercise, yet another to become more organized. But these endeavors are typically doomed to fail. Why?

When a habit pattern such as overeating first becomes established it does so because it is the best response to a given stimulus. Most infants learn that food is associated with love because the two are usually provided together. As the child develops, he will experience moments when love is denied him. When a parent is depressed, anxious, preoccupied, or angry he or she will not be able to respond optimally to the child's needs. In his distress, the child may turn to food, associatively related to love, as a partial solution. As he continues to develop, this response to distress may become generalized. He will eat in response to any discomfort.

For any new problem, the mind always chooses the solution that is the best possible one at that moment. For the young child, eating may be the activity that most successfully decreases his distress. Once chosen, however, the response becomes locked in and a habit pattern is formed. Later, when better solutions are available, they can be chosen only under certain specific conditions. Otherwise, the individual will continue with a habit pattern that has become maladaptive.

A habit pattern can be changed when, while experiencing a stimulus, the individual also perceives a complex stimulus: that is, a stimulus that conveys two contradictory meanings. This causes the mind to pause before choosing a solution, allowing time for a new and better solution to be selected.

Consider the image above. We see a tree through a window. Each is a complex stimulus. The window is a barrier, yet because it is transparent it appears to offer no obstruction. The tree appears to enclose us yet it is not a real barrier. When we look at this image, it becomes associatively related to whatever else we are experiencing simultaneously: our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. At this moment, the mind can choose a new and better solution for a disequilibrium if one exists. For the person who overeats, a new solution can be chosen for whatever distress he is experiencing at the moment.

In order for any new solution to reach awareness, however, it must be re-experienced in the mind repeatedly until its novelty wanes. The more momentous a change would be, the more disequilibrating it is and the more repetitions of the new solution are required before it can come into awareness and be acted on. Complex stimuli are not rare. Many who wish to diet have undoubtedly experienced a complex



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stimulus while in distress or while thinking about food. Their minds may have already accessed new and better solutions. But because there have not been enough repetitions, they are not able to implement new habit patterns.

What about exercise? We have been told that it will help us achieve and maintain good health and contribute to longer life. Why do many people have trouble beginning or continuing? Just as eating well is a normal activity that can be interfered with by a maladaptive habit pattern, so too is bodily movement. From the time that locomotion becomes possible, children have a desire to move. Motivated by the need for new stimuli, the toddler explores her surroundings, the young child learns to walk, run, and ride her tricycle, and the older child enjoys acrobatics and sports. These activities also provide kinesthetic stimulation, activation of endorphins, discharge of tension, the challenge of new goals, and the pleasure of mastery. They contribute to an optimal stimulus level. For some these activities are further elaborated in adulthood and remain a source of pleasure.

For others, however, stronger stimuli override the desire for exercise. Some are obviously negative: physical discomfort from exercise that is too demanding, pressure both from within and without to succeed, disappointment over losses in competition, embarrassment over poor performance in comparison with others, time pressure, the feeling of physical fatigue that results from enduring a number of chronic emotional discomforts. And if the exercise is not sufficiently interesting, understimulation will cause discomfort.

Competing interests may not be experienced as negative stimuli. Working, spending time with family and friends, and leisure pursuits may seem more engrossing than exercise. But in the healthy individual, these needs and desires alternate with the wish for physical activity. The person who can't stop working, talking to friends on the phone, or watching TV is displaying a maladaptive habit pattern. These activities provide partial solutions for chronic discomforts. Pursued to the exclusion of exercise, they deprive the individual of its benefits and leave one feeling physically sluggish.

Eating well and exercising are natural activities that become disrupted only when they are overridden by maladaptive habit patterns. So, too, is organizing. Why? Because it diminishes the disequilibrium that is caused by disorder and provides the aesthetic pleasure that comes with pattern and rhythm. Disorganization is most obviously undesirable when it interferes with our ability to find something, go somewhere, or even navigate through a room. But any level of disorder creates disequilibrium that interferes with our optimal comfort.

In the beginning the young child's life is organized for her but as she develops she begins to assume that function herself. She develops opinions about what she wants and when and where she wants it. She is beginning to assume responsibility for maintaining an optimal stimulus level. Hopefully this effort will progress to competence in organizing her life. Why does this often not occur? Why do many people become disorganized? For the same kinds of reasons that they eat improperly or neglect exercise. Eating well and exercising are themselves organizing activities because they are instances of arranging stimuli so as to maintain optimal comfort.

Whether you consider yourself well organized or less so, your Inner Guide, by solving all disequilibria over time, will enable you to become fully organized and that will bring maximum comfort.

*QUESTION:*

“I want the changes that self-hypnosis can bring, but I don’t seem to be able to make myself do it. Why is that?”

*ANSWER:*

There are a couple of possibilities. You may have developed a habit pattern of controlling your environment and the people in it as a way of protecting yourself from unwanted stimuli. You would then be reluctant to relinquish control to an Inner Guide. Or you may have developed a habit pattern of rebelling against authority, in which case you may view an Inner Guide as one who must be resisted. But an Inner Guide is not authoritarian. Its wish is for you to become very comfortable. It couldn’t help you by being bossy. It is a gentle being who can become your best friend.

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I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at [info@davis-foundation.org](mailto:info@davis-foundation.org). If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

*Judith M. Davis*