

# How to Change Behavior Patterns: Completing Your New Year's Resolutions

By Jay Uhler

Changing behavior is difficult. In fact, it is more difficult than it needs to be. This article will tell you how to fulfill your promises to change and explain why it has seemed impossible in the past.

People attempt to create change by using only their mind. By the number of New Year's resolutions that didn't bring about the desired change, it is obvious that simply thinking them into fulfillment does not work. It only makes you feel guilty because you didn't follow through with the change you wished for.

One reason change does not occur for us is that we do not understand the foundation upon which the behavior patterns are built. It is helpful to have that information. The approach we will use is to clarify the foundations of the current patterns in order to create new behaviors.

The second reason is that each behavior pattern has emotions connected to it. Much of our society is afraid of feelings; therefore, we do not learn the skills to constructively express our emotions<sup>1</sup>. If behavior patterns are to change, the feelings that are connected to them must be recognized, explored and released.

I believe that when we are born into this world, we are beautiful at our core. As we grow, our beautiful core can become hidden because some of our actions are unpleasant or irritating to other people. It is our interactions with these people that affect us. We develop behavior patterns, which are the best we have at the time, to cope with the situations we encounter, but which we now want to change because they no longer are effective or may even complicate our life and our relationships.

As we grow, our behavior patterns develop from four influences.

One past influence is what we learn from the **models** we see. They may be our parents, family members, friends, teachers, coaches, ministers, heroes, community leaders, and others we observe. We watch how they act and want to act like them. We may want to act the opposite from the behavior they exhibit. It is much easier to emulate persons whose actions we like than it is to discover for ourselves actions that differ from those we dislike. If we have positive models, they influence our present behavior. People who act negatively may also indirectly influence our behavior.

A second influence is the **roles** that we held in our family of learning. We may have been the caretaker for other family members. We may have been the "parent" to our siblings (or to our parents). We may have been expected to be an outstanding athlete, a maid, the man of the house, or the class brain or clown (these may be the same person). The roles that we learned as a child influence our present behavior.

A third influence is our beliefs that are attached to our behavior patterns. We may have been given anything we wanted. We may have had to fight for everything we got.

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We may have learned that we could only get our needs met by manipulation. We may have learned that others exist to serve us. We may have learned that there is never enough to go around—learned a sense of scarcity. We may have learned that we are bad or that we are to blame if something goes wrong. We may have learned that we are a good decent person. Our beliefs affect our behavior.

A fourth influence is the way we learned to **cope** with our life experiences during our childhood. Often we bring the ways of coping that we developed in childhood or during our teenage years into our adult life. Sometimes these coping mechanisms are useful, but often they no longer serve us because the situations and circumstances we face are different from those when we were a child.

An example is children who learn that manipulation is the only way to get their needs met. That approach may be reinforced in a vocational setting where they are rewarded for it, yet it destroys their marriage, family or friend relationships. It may also backfire at work. Even if it does not work in the present, the behavior will be difficult to stop because historically it seemed to work and it is an old friend.

As a result of the four influences—models, roles, beliefs and coping mechanisms—we develop behavior patterns around our beautiful core and they become ingrained in us. Sometimes we build walls around our beautiful core so that others cannot see it and we cannot see our inner beauty.

Here is a way to bring about the change we want. First, we list the **behavior pattern** we want to change. Second, we list the **beliefs** about that behavior. Third, we list the **feelings** connected to the behavior. Fourth, we list the benefits—the **gains**—of giving it up or of replacing it with a new behavior?

Here is a chart to help you focus your attention as you do the exercise.

Behavior Patterns	Beliefs	Feelings	Gains

First, write under Behavior Patterns the behavior that you would like to change.

Second, list all the Beliefs that you have about the behavior. Include them all. Think about them. There is no rush. You have had the behavior for years. It is worth a few minutes to ponder the beliefs that are attached to them.

Third, reflect on the Feelings that are relevant to the behavior. Let me list the feelings. There are six core emotions: pleasure, pain, anger, affection, fear and helplessness. Do not judge your emotions or yourself. All emotions are acceptable. They are energy. People confuse emotions with actions. Emotions are a part of being human and they simply emerge. Actions often do not resemble the core emotion.

It is useful to look at the emotion under the one that you experience. Often the first feeling we experience is anger. If we look under it, we may discover pain, fear, or helplessness as the bottom line emotion. When someone has a temper tantrum and looks angry, the real feeling often is helpless. Once we are able to clarify the emotion that is behind the behavior pattern and deal with it, it can free us from the behavior and we can make a change—we can let go of the behavior pattern.

The final step is to look at the benefits of letting go of the behavior pattern that is detracting from our life. We can list all the benefits of eliminating it and the advantages of shifting it.

By listing the behavior pattern, the beliefs about it, the emotions attached to it and the benefits of changing it, we can create the desired change. If necessary, there are additional steps. Analyze your models and your roles in your family of learning to get additional information, then look at your beliefs and feelings that are connected to them.

Probably the most important part of this whole exercise is the segment about feelings. That is usually what binds us to a behavior. Facing the feelings and managing them is the key that unlocks the shackles that bind us.

Best wishes to you. May you enjoy your freedom and the excitement that comes from self-control!

<sup>1</sup>For information about how to manage feelings, see Uhler, J. 1993. *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings*. Boston: Ambassador Press International.

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